

KOJIMA'S NEXT-GEN VISION

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QUEST TO CREATE
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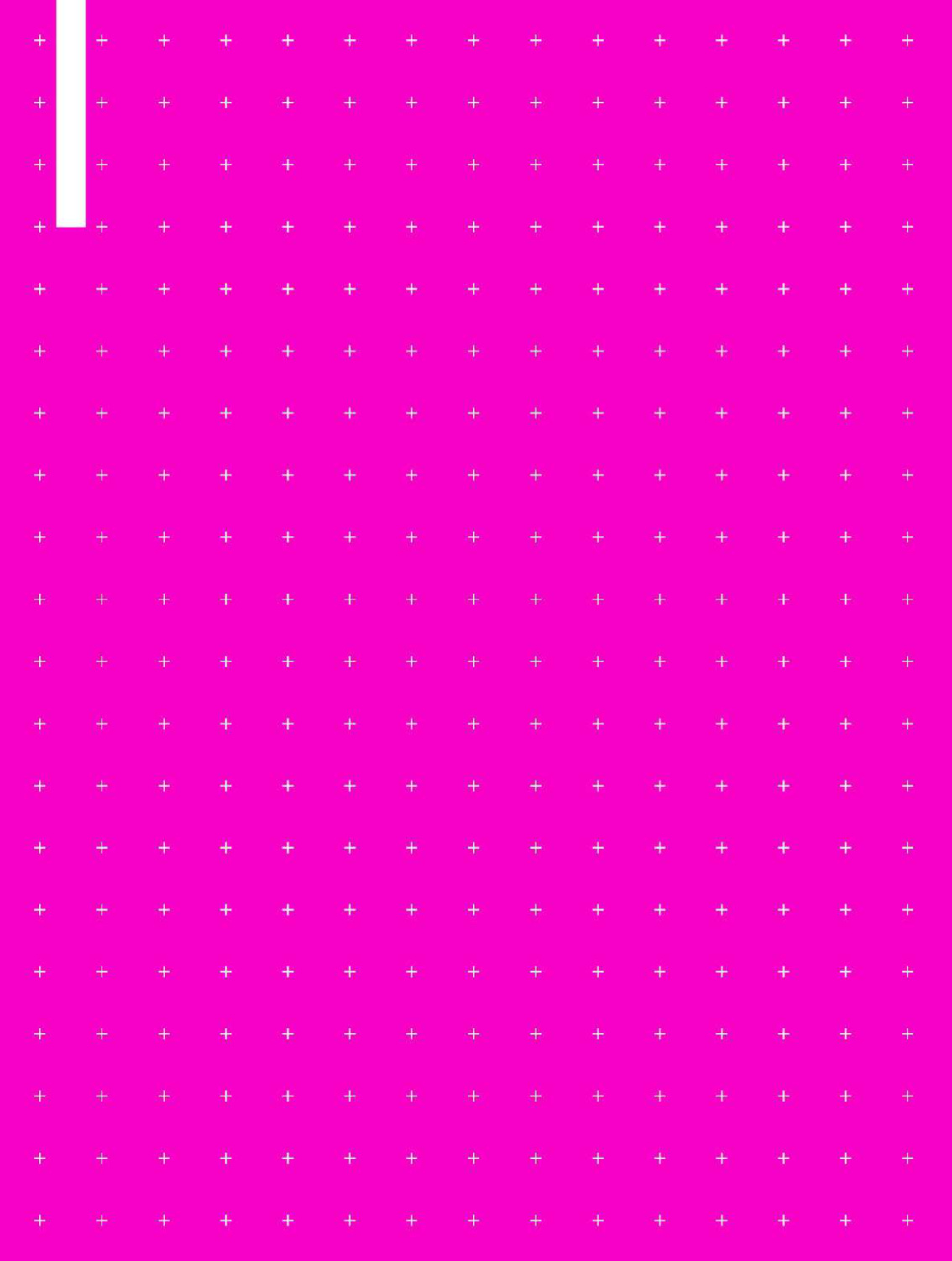
Konami's new facial rendering tech allows it to create astonishing models that are difficult to tell apart from reality. Inside, we discover how it's being applied alongside a fresh approach to physics as the company seeks to reclaim its place in virtual sports with *Pro Evo*

#252

APRIL 2013

REVIEWS

METAL GEAR RISING
TOMB RAIDER
ALIENS:
COLONIAL MARINES
LUIGI'S MANSION 2
CASTLEVANIA:
MIRROR OF FATE
CRYSIS 3



So now we know what the next generation is

It's like a race-tuned PC. And now we know what the games running on it will look like: similar to today, but even glossier and more detailed. PlayStation4's technical specs may not have held many surprises, but that doesn't mean it isn't an enticing reminder of the benefits of a console. The multifunctional PC and smartphone have rapidly become leading gaming platforms in the past couple of years, but it's still heartening to feel the profound attraction of a machine in which each component is designed purely to play games. We start our report on PS4 on p10.

As much as Sony directed its presentation to the public, it was also trying to talk to developers, an acknowledgement of the fact that PS4's future is in their hands. Indeed, the real story behind what we'll be playing for the next few years is how developers will grapple with the new demands that achieving the greater gloss and detail evident in Sony's demos will place upon them. For some, it's an uphill struggle, especially if they're already labouring to achieve the heights that they reached in the last generation. Konami's *Pro Evolution Soccer* team is one such developer. With its series languishing against an ascendent *FIFA*, it knows it must reinvent the game and its production processes in order to reclaim its former standing. And, as we discover in our feature starting on p72, key to realising this is Kojima Productions' Fox Engine.

As much as you might expect Fox Engine to be about next-generation gloss, it's far more pragmatic than that. It's not even necessarily about next-generation hardware. Instead, it's about easing some of the burden on developers and their existing hardware so that they can deliver games that meet the gaming public's raised expectations. It has led to graphics like those on our cover, where the difference between a photo (right) and CGI (left) is hard to discern. PS4 is powerful, but perhaps the real power behind the next generation lies in the engine.





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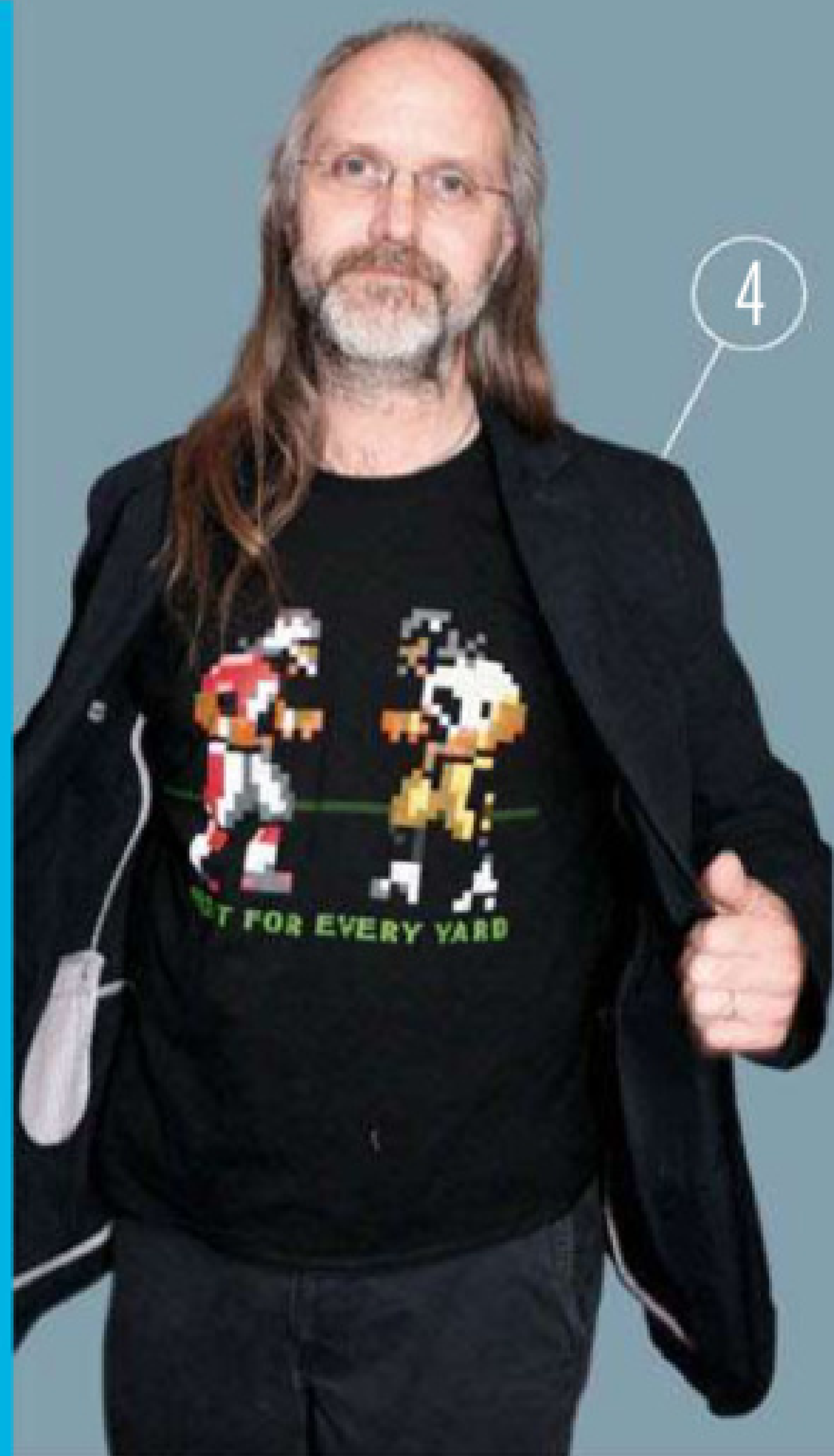


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GAMING WORLD INSIGHT, INTERROGATION AND INFORMATION



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After a grand reveal in New York, we now know that Sony's vision for next-generation gaming is a PlayStation 4 (1) designed like a PC but built like a console, with a new DualShock controller, a new user interface and a new commitment to social networking and online sharing. Our analysis of PS4's announcement begins on p10, including a look at its first wave of games and Gaikai's role in Sony's future. While David Cage promises new storytelling opportunities with Sony's new platform, we question independent developers about their autobiographical games (2) on p18, which tell stories drawn from their own lives. Their games tackle issues of gender and identity, replicate the mundane in agonising detail and even reimagine real-life pain as metaphorical monsters. Literal monsters abound in *Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate* (3), which debuts on 3DS and Wii U in Europe this month; on p20 producer Ryoza Tsujimoto considers how to make the successful behemoth accessible to new audiences and why a single Gunlance can break everything. Soundbytes (4) on p22 rounds up the best of this month's industry commentary, while in *My Favourite Game* on p24 TV presenter Jonathan Ross (5) discusses *The New Zealand Story*, the relationship between comics and videogames, and the beauty of his rarest gaming treasure, a limited edition Dreamcast Divers TV.



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Up-to-the-minute
game news and views

Sony reveals PlayStation 4

The games and the vision behind the true start to the eighth generation

Sony has to be a little disappointed. For all the substance it displayed at its PlayStation Meeting at the Hammerstein Ballroom in the Manhattan Center, New York City, the first reaction from a swathe of the tech and mainstream press was to point out it hadn't shown PS4's case.

The lack of a plastic carapace to pin a set of ideals and features to meant that PS4 perhaps didn't get all the front-page news stories that Sony was hoping for, nor the broad recognition that it had properly kicked off the next console generation. Consoles' identities aren't quite so tied to industrial design as other consumer electronics, of course, and we did get to see a controller. DualShock 4, to us, was quite enough, especially as it quietly epitomised much of Sony's ambition for PS4.

Its redesigned trigger buttons are said to do away with the almost universally criticised sponginess of DualShocks past. This is a controller designed to compete with best-

in-breed controllers elsewhere, which is to say the 360's. The sticks remain in the same place, though, a mark of a visual identity Sony struck in 1997 with the first DualShock. Then come flashes of the new: a Share button, which is designed to plug PS4 into player culture and the wider Internet, and a touchpad to open up new control options. And finally come elements to make existing functions more coherent: a speaker and microphone jack (to use with a bundled headset), meaning all PS4 owners will have access to voice comms, and integrated light bar, so that

all games can make use of motion control, although this is apparently not a full replacement for Move.

What DualShock 4 doesn't do is point to an encompassing philosophy for PS4. Past generations might have been definably about 3D or HD, but rather than make grand

statements about what the next generation is to Sony, the announcement pushed the idea that at the centre of PS4 is, simply, players. Arguably, every generation is about players, but at least we do know what Sony says the next gen isn't, and that's a cross-media entertainment hub.

It wasn't the only jab at Microsoft in Sony's presentation, but it was perhaps the most keenly aimed. As Xbox travels further towards a manifest destiny as the beating heart of family entertainment, whether you like it or not, Sony presented PS4 as a pure gaming machine. **Mark Cerny**, lead system architect, spoke about the proliferation in apps that

consoles now run – PS3 is Netflix's top delivery platform – but, he said, all this can interfere with the console's core role.

Cerny's appearance as the holder of Sony's vision for PS4 was telling. Having worked on *Crash Bandicoot*, *Spyro*, and *Ratchet & Clank*, this was a developer holding the keys to PlayStation's innards. He therefore represented a message about a new sense of humility at Sony, one that will be fielding far more conventional hardware under the Sony badge than the likes of Emotion Engine and Cell. So, confirming the leaks, PS4 will be driven by PC technology: Jaguar, a single-chip processor comprising an eight-core AMD x86 CPU and a 1.84 teraflops Radeon-based GPU, sharing 8GB of GDDR5 memory, supported by Blu-ray and hard drives.

This design is all about efficiency. Having the CPU and GPU occupy the same chip and share memory makes it easier to move tasks to whichever unit handles them best. The speedy memory – the same kind used in most modern PC GPUs, because they throw large amounts of data around quickly – reduces bottlenecks, since components aren't forced to wait before they're supplied with the data they need to work with.

"Like a PC in many ways, but supercharged," Cerny said. PC owners may sneer, dismissing PS4 as a high-end PC that will rapidly become low-end while they keep upgrading, but that would be a shortsighted view of what Sony is hoping to achieve. Yes, PS4's essential components might be PC-like, but they're custom-designed to be cost- **1**

Physics middleware maker Havok showed off a demo in which one million objects fell across a city scene, a measure of PS4's power



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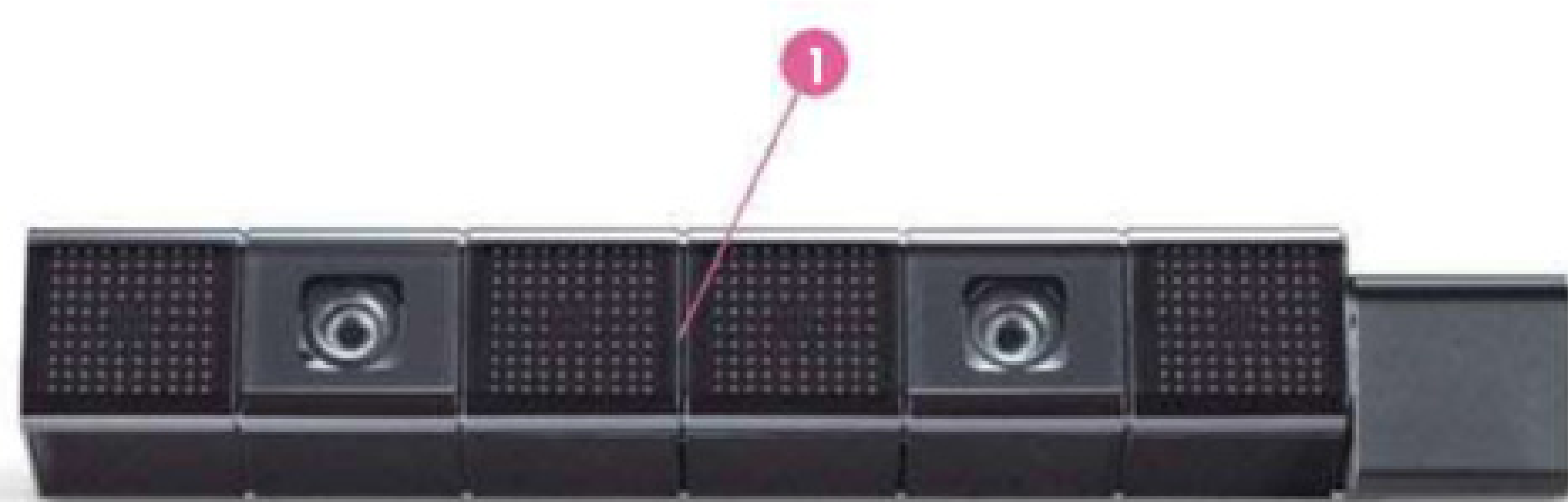
Andrew House, group CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment, was PlayStation Meeting's compere, his British background and Japanese fluency symbols of SCE's international nature

PS4™



Killzone was a natural choice for PS4's debut, given that Guerrilla has always pushed at the limits of Sony hardware. After *Shadow Fall*'s opening flight through a stunningly rendered sci-fi cityscape, we wondered whether gameplay enhancements would accompany the graphical ones. Since we then witnessed a conventional sequence of running and gunning, the jury's still out





1 PlayStation 4 Eye, a stereoscopic camera, features twin 1280x 800px cameras running at 60fps and four mics. It will ship with PS4.
2 The Light Bar grants every controller Move-like functionality, making motion control a central feature.
3 Trigger buttons are "tightened for more control", says Denny.
4 The Share button allows players to scan through their last few minutes of play, select a

sequence and upload it to PSN or to thirdparty video-sharing websites.
5 The two-point capacitive touchpad is similar to Vita's rear pad but will click when depressed. It will enable new control options.
6 A mono speaker comparable to that found on Wii Remotes.
7 A stereo headset jack shows ambition for PS4 as a central platform for multiplayer gaming.
8 PlayStation 4 Eye tilts, much like Kinect

effective and work together in a way that the PC's necessarily modular form cannot.

So while Sony is turning away from a heritage of doing things its own way and ignoring the consequences for the developers making the games, PS4 is also faithful to the principle that a console is race-tuned for gaming, its components working in concert.

This message is clearly so important to Sony that the PS4's specifications are a direct result of asking developers – both internal and external – what they wanted. Apparently, the developers were so onside that even the recalcitrant likes of Blizzard and Jon Blow, two of the most uncompromising game makers around, came onstage to announce that they are bringing their games to PS4. Demonstrating it had won them over, via *Diablo III* and *The Witness*, is a real coup for Sony, bespeaking its continuing commitment to support indies, as well as

Demonstrating it had won Blizzard and Jon Blow over, via *Diablo III* and *The Witness*, was a real coup

the desire to court PC's biggest, most monumental entities.

So what kind of games can this developer-tuned architecture realise? On the evidence of the crop of games Sony has showed, the answer is ones very similar to those of the current generation. *Killzone: Shadow Fall* looks beautiful but

seems to play like a standard linear shooter, while *Knack*, a cheery thirdperson brawler, even looks a bit retrograde. *Infamous: Second Son*'s cinematics display a rich and polished game world, but it's hard to know whether it will play markedly differently to

its predecessors. Evolution Studios has fallen back to graphical detailing and firstperson presentation to differentiate *Driveclub* from existing racers.

Where realtime graphics do seem to demonstrate new possibilities is in the delicate nuances of expression in Quantic Dream's realtime demo of an old man's

head. While creative director David Cage opines that increasing polygon counts will help him create more 'emotion' in games, the demo wordlessly shows how subsurface scattering, modelling the way light interacts with semi-transparent skin, and subtle animation can help realise rich characters that have ascended the other side of the uncanny valley. Whether this face could exist in a busy game world isn't clear – nor whether Quantic Dream, or Sony at large, has the requisite AI to breathe life into it – but the promise is there.

Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs* is once again the outlier, with a demo that shows off its open city's dynamically generated scenarios. This more systems-led game world design seemed to impress an audience that craved more than the linear storytelling of the *Shadow Fall* reveal that came before it, even if glimpses of the game again raise more questions than they answer. Can we really parse all that information at once? Will the final game be reduced to 'Press Y to raise barrier'? 2



DIABLO III

Publisher Activision Blizzard | **Developer** Blizzard Entertainment
Blizzard's hack-and-slasher is making its way from PC and Mac to both PS3 and PS4, although only PS3 screenshots have been made available. All post-release PC content will be included, while controls, interface and camera have all been overhauled for big-screen play. The headline feature, though, is local fourplayer coop. Hopefully, the PC version's always-on DRM won't survive the porting process.



DRIVECLUB

Publisher SCE | **Developer** Evolution Studios
OK, his tone in the presentation may have been a little too fetishistic, but too much scorn was poured on Matt Southern's enthusiasm for the attention to detail in these supercar interiors. The idea, after all, is to put you in as realistic a recreation as possible of some of the world's fastest cars – carpets, paintjobs and all. Forcing a firstperson view is a ballsy move, as is the emphasis on social, team-based play.



KNACK

Publisher SCE | **Developer** Japan Studio
The decision to have *Knack* as the first game the world saw running on PS4 was presumably a logistical one. Director Mark Cerny was already on stage, and it was further proof of PS4's physics grunt. Aside from that, this simple-looking thirdperson brawler with a light layer of shape shifting was a strange choice that unfortunately most strongly evoked humdrum 360 launch title *Kameo: Elements Of Power*.



THE WITNESS

Publisher Thekla | **Developer** In-house
Braid creator Jonathan Blow spoke carefully onstage, stressing the word 'console' in console exclusive, but that didn't stop the masses inferring Blow had taken Sony's shilling to make firstperson puzzler *The Witness* for PS4 alone. It's changed since our last look at it in E233, its island more tightly contained and packed with puzzles than before. Little wonder, then, that Blow now puts the game's runtime at 25 hours.



MEDIA MOLECULE DEMO

Publisher SCE | **Developer** Media Molecule
Not a game announcement so much as a celebration of a studio's creative freedom and flair, but there's clear potential for Media Molecule's free-sculpting PS Move tech demo to be huge. A game in which you can easily create intricate 3D objects and drop them into a world other players can explore? Sounds like a next-gen *Minecraft* to us. Quite what was happening in the puppetry-based second half, we're not sure.



WATCH DOGS

Publisher Ubisoft | **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal
Without the scene-stealing surprise factor of last year's E3, this latest glimpse of Ubisoft Montreal's game – confirmed to launch alongside PS4 – invited questions, mostly about player agency. Are protagonist Aiden Pearce's tricks to escape pursuit – raised barriers, shot-out tyres, stopped trains and the rest – up to the player, or tightly scripted? Still, its appearance attracted some of the biggest cheers of the event.



INFAMOUS: SECOND SON

Publisher SCE | **Developer** Sucker Punch
With Cole McGrath apparently consigned to the superhero scrapheap, 24-year-old Delsin Rowe leads *Second Son*. Along with McGrath go his electrical powers – Rowe's involve smoke and lightning-fast attacks, with PS4 providing plenty of particle effects. Familiar Seattle landmarks should lend a hard edge to a vision of a paranoid, surveillance-obsessed future.



QUANTIC DREAM DEMO

Publisher SCE | **Developer** Quantic Dream
The world's eyes rolled when David Cage explained his quest for more emotion in next-gen games with a history of his protagonists' polygon counts. The tech demo that followed, though, supported his argument: this is the most believable, expressive avatar the studio has created to date. We hope it's backed by AI that can bring the high-end graphics to life.



DEEP DOWN

Publisher Capcom | **Developer** In-house
Is this showcase for Capcom's Panta Rhei engine a new *Dragon's Dogma*? Capcom's take on *Dark Souls*? Somewhere in between, most likely. *Deep Down*'s first trailer hints at gear having genuine physical properties – a knight's shield begins to melt under the flames of a dragon's breath – and destructible environments, with fire arrows turning columns to rubble.



From top: Alex Evans of Media Molecule; Mark Cerny, PS4's lead system architect

Sony has to hope its more creative side was expressed by Media Molecule's demo of 3D sculpting and puppetry. We learned that it's powered by Move and the new PlayStation 4 Eye, but exactly what was happening wasn't clear. Still, the prospect of user-generated worlds made through Move could grant PS4 its own *Minecraft*, albeit one filtered through Media Molecule's materials-obsessed lens, and that could be huge.

Regardless of the games that Sony specifically showed, PS4's specifications clearly demonstrate is that it's a very capable machine, and one supposedly slightly more powerful than the next Xbox. Not that the great majority of the console market will really care about the technical details. Either way, the message onstage was that the architecture will put creativity in developers' hands. And that was backed by the casual mention that Sony will support self-published games on PS4's PSN Store. President of worldwide studios Shuhei Yoshida has suggested that developers will be able to set their own prices, but it's clearly a nascent scheme. It's also one that has the potential to give PS4 unprecedented openness to devs – yet another acknowledgement of Sony's commitment to listen to what they want.

The fruits of this will take a long time to ripen, of course. From what we do know about PS4, where it comes alive is in its player-centric details, with two sets of features having the potential to make it feel genuinely fresh, assuming they're enabled from launch.

The first is the drive to reduce the friction between player and game. The idea is that playing on a PS4 can be as immediate as switching on a TV, bringing the speed with which you can start and stop playing on a smartphone into the living room. It's enabled in part through a low-power standby mode that allows play to be suspended in a similar manner to Vita and PSP, and partly through a new custom chip that can download and update games in the background, as well as while the console is in standby mode,

a tacit nod to the increasingly service-led model of game development. Moreover, downloads will not need to be complete before they're playable, similar to the way games such as *World Of Warcraft* update. The latter feature will be further supported by a new PSN service that can learn player preferences, whether by genre or creator, and automatically download game demos that match.

Then there's Gaikai. Following Sony's \$380 million purchase of the technology in July last year, the company plans to press the game-streaming service into action to provide access to thousands of games, including demos from the PSN Store, allow us to try any game instantly. This is all to produce, according to Gaikai co-founder **David Perry**, the "fastest, most powerful network for gaming in the world". A direct job at Xbox Live there, then, from another Sony executive with strong development roots.

The service is likely also to feature a library of legacy PlayStation titles, but this comes with a problematic payload: because of the critical difference between the hardware of PS3 and PS4, the new console will not be able to play PS3 games natively, and therefore will rely on streaming. Owners of PS3 games will thus have to wait for this feature to launch before they can put their old consoles away (as long as their Internet connections can handle game streaming).

The second set of features is sharing, with DualShock 4's Share button at the centre, allowing players to upload brief sequences of gameplay to PSN or stream it. Few will be in any doubt as to the cultural significance of Let's Play YouTube videos, Twitch.tv and the raft of new gaming celebrities these services have crowned. Sony is acutely aware of how gameplay videos, whether live or prerecorded, can forge communities as well as publicise new titles to huge audiences. By enabling mass online gaming media, goes the theory, Sony can help PS4 remain relevant.

Sony aspires to make PlayStation 4 meaningful when you're away from it through connected apps



This isn't to discount other features, such as the return of Remote Play on Vita ("We believe in it so much that it's part of the architecture," said Perry), which will benefit from Gaikai's tech and custom networking hardware to offer lower latencies than Vita and PSP can currently achieve with PS3. The longterm goal is that all PS4 games will support Remote Play, a move seemingly made to sideline Wii U's chief appeal.

And then there's the aspiration to make PS4 meaningful when you're away from the console through connected tablet and smartphone apps. There are subtler moves, too, such as allowing you to be friends on PS4 with people on your Facebook friends list. It's another little player-centric quality that proves Sony's desire to be less a proprietary island and more a part of the wider world.

All of this sounds like a substantial improvement to the day-to-day reality of owning a console, but they're the sort of features, other than the sharing, that you might not appreciate until you start using them. Quite how Sony intends to sell them to the general public on shop floors isn't clear, especially when most are



DASH DESIGN
PS4's dashboard appears to be strongly related to the design of its revamped PSN Store on PS3, which relaunched late last year, while also hinting towards the presentation of various popular websites. Its streaming video looks similar to Ustream and Twitch.tv, with chat sitting to the right of the video window, while its newsfeed of highscore challenge snippets, comments notifications and game news is presented in a set of tiles reminiscent of Pinterest's layout. The large buttons, meanwhile, seem to hint that DualShock 4's touch interface might be used as a pointer.

already available in some form on other platforms, especially PC – even if they're not in such a coherent and apparently easy-to-use form.

PS4's announcement was

uncommonly rich in substance for a first reveal of a console. Of course, there were dissenters, especially among analysts and business commentators. There was that unseen shell, as well as questions over whether Sony is properly committed to 'the cloud', and if PS4 is enough to secure a future for the console itself. In the wake of the event, Sony's share price wobbled: up from \$14.46 immediately afterwards and then down to \$14.21 by the following morning, and down to \$14.07 at the end of the week.

And yet Sony has so far put every foot right. From the calibre of the hardware to attending to the changes to the industry since PS3 was first revealed in May 2005, it's a pragmatic but confident response to the challenges that lie ahead for all consoles. Sony's next step is perhaps where its real challenge lies: selling the idea of PS4 to the world in time for its launch later this year. ■

Q&A

Michael Denny
Senior vice president
SCE Worldwide Studios



What was behind the timing of the announcement?

There's been a lot of speculation out there about when the next gen is coming. It just felt right. We wanted to do the announcement in stages throughout the year leading up to the launch, and this event was very much about just introducing people to the concept of PlayStation 4, the philosophy behind it, why make the choices of architecture we did, why we wanted to get the world's development talent on board, and why we wanted to place gamers very much at the heart of what we're doing.

Is the hardware more cost-effective than, say, PS3 was on launch because it consists of standardised PC components?

I think that's a fairly good assumption, but the architecture was first and foremost informed by what the game development community wanted: to produce a system for ease and richness of development. For example, decisions like having 8GB of onboard high-speed system memory is a fantastic win for ease of development and also the richness of the content they can produce.

Many developers are complaining about the strictures of working with platform holders and talking about why they're attracted to alternative routes to publishing such as Kickstarter and the App Store. What are you doing to counter that attitude?

You can look at that from many levels. The first thing is an architecture system that's easy to develop for but – I wouldn't say difficult to master, but people can keep getting more and more out of it. Then it's our approach to different development teams from a firstparty basis; we have an external development studio who really excel and want to look at new talent in particular and startups.

Like Sony Santa Monica?

Well, I'm talking about Europe, the department based out of Liverpool, the department I was heavily involved in myself back in the day when we signed up studios like Guerrilla and Media Molecule, who came into the office just four guys with a big idea. So it is trying to identify talent and work with them. But that's my firstparty basis; the question is more to do with indie developers as well and thirdparty models, and we want to be more open to that. We want to be a platform of choice for self-publishing.

Through self-publishing, devs will be able to set their own prices – can you explain further?

We've not gone into that much detail, but

as we've listened to developers in terms of system architecture, of course we have to listen to developers in terms of other ideas that are important to the longevity of a platform, and of course all these things need thinking about and we need to come to the right conclusions.

It sounds a big change for PlayStation's traditional business model. Does that mean that SCE as a business organisation has changed to a large extent?

I think the main point is that, since PlayStation 3's launch, the landscape's changed massively in terms of how gaming is proliferated across a number of different devices – not just bespoke platforms [but] across smartphones, tablets and open devices. I think gamers have got used to consuming that content in lots of different ways, and I think we as a platform need to be more open to that as well in terms of knowing that we're offering a new experience. We believe in a fresh experience, a higher-level experience. There are more gamers out there now, they're coming in via different routes, but if they're consuming games in different distribution models, in different monetisation models, then I think it's something we have to be open to.

In the same way, then, you must be looking at better supporting service-led game development, which relies on constant updating.

Yes, they are aspects we're looking at. Again, similar to some of the other questions that are going down this avenue, I don't have any confirmations or announcements to let you know about, other than to say we want to be a more open platform, a more friendly platform to make it conducive to self-publishing and other business models.

The list of principles on which PS4 has been designed are valuable, but complicated to sell the console against on the high street. Do you have any ideas on how PS4's nuances can be conveyed?

In a very simple answer: great games. As I say, what we tried to explain last night from the outset [was] we can get the architecture right; we can get the world's best creators on; we can give them a system where they connect, sell, and take away any shackles of technology and just make the games they've always wanted to make. That will be the big differentiator: can we get fantastic content that people see is a leap on from everything else they have? I think people are ready, genuinely ready, for something new, and we're excited to be able to offer that if we can.

The game of life

A growing number of indie developers are mining their own life experiences for creative inspiration

David S Gallant would be the first to admit that it's all fun and games until somebody loses a job. The Canadian game designer, following the literary axiom of 'write what you know', made a game based on his day job of handling customer support queries for the Canada Revenue Agency. *I Get This Call Every Day* sits players in the chair of a call centre employee struggling to assist a caller who wants to change his address, but is resentful and unhelpful when it comes to satisfying the security measures required by law to verify his identity.

The voiceover work, which Gallant handled himself, betrays exasperation at various points. But the game's dialogue doesn't feel exaggerated for comedic effect. The only aspect of the design that could be interpreted as snarky would be the visuals, which look like they were drawn in MS Paint while mildly inebriated (Gallant admits to being "a terrible visual artist"). For anyone who's worked a mundane job and comes to the game open-minded, *I Get This Call Every Day* hits a nerve. You've shared an unsavoury slice of Gallant's life experience and emerged more empathetic for it.

I Get This Call Every Day doesn't call out Gallant's former employer, and could flexibly represent the experience of any call centre employee. No details point to the Canada Revenue Agency. But after the Toronto Star outed Gallant via the sensationalist headline "Tax department employee creates online game to vent his frustration with taxpayers", his employment was soon terminated.

The developer's plight isn't notable as the first time somebody has been sacked for airing job frustrations – the expression 'Dooched' entered the lexicon when blogger Heather Armstrong lost her job



David S Gallant ended up losing his job after the Toronto Star outed him over his portrayal of routine call centre ennui, *I Get This Call Every Day*

for writing about colleagues she found irksome. But it's the first time it's happened to a designer venting job dissatisfaction via the medium of a videogame.

"[As] I'd been working to teach myself programming and game development, I decided to express my frustrations through a game," says Gallant. "It worked well enough. The act of making choices in a narrative, even small ones, is often enough to bring the audience into that narrative in a way that cannot be achieved in other expressive media."

Games' ability to inspire empathy should make them prime territory for autobiographical scenarios such as Gallant's, but one thing apparently keeping these from a broader audience is that the majority of players expect all games to be 'fun' in a rather narrow, frivolous sense.

"I think a large portion of the mainstream gaming audience balks at the notion of a game not totally focused on fun and enjoyment," says Gallant. "At least I get that impression from comments on my Greenlight page, and on articles that covered the game prior to the mess with my job. Books, film, and television have hit that point where thought-provoking pieces are accepted by audiences, even celebrated. What was the last mindless action flick that won the Academy Award for Best Picture? Maybe it's because games are a newer medium, but that acceptance isn't there yet. I believe that's why it is even more important to explore these experiences through games."

Gallant admits he isn't the only person undertaking this exploration, and finds

inspiration in the work of **Anna Anthropy**, a game designer, author and activist. Her game *Dys4ia* uses a series of miniature art game scenarios to express the emotional and physical complexities that accompanied her path towards gender reassignment. Not content merely to explain what she's gone through, she wants players to experience it themselves.

"If there's anything most of games culture and the dudes it coddles are lacking in, it's empathy," says Anthropy. "But they understand games, and games have a hell of a capacity for building empathy. *Dys4ia* is about not explaining the frustration I've had to go through with gatekeepers, with systematic oppression, but making the player, at least to some small extent, experience it for herself."

Most examples of autobiographical games come from a lone author/developer – and are fairly lo-fi. The popularity of the memoir in mainstream literature suggests there's a wide audience that enjoys hearing about others' life experiences.

Even so, Anthropy remains cautious.

"The people in suits are always interested in finding the popular thing and bending it to serve their wallets," she says. "There'll be a day when they realise people are more interested in meaningful human stories than military fantasies for game-literate manbros. And on that day, they're going to try and buy personal stories, or buy the people who can produce a reasonable facsimile for them. It won't be a victory; that's not the goal. The goal is to empower everyone to be able to tell their stories without depending on a big publisher to fund them." ■





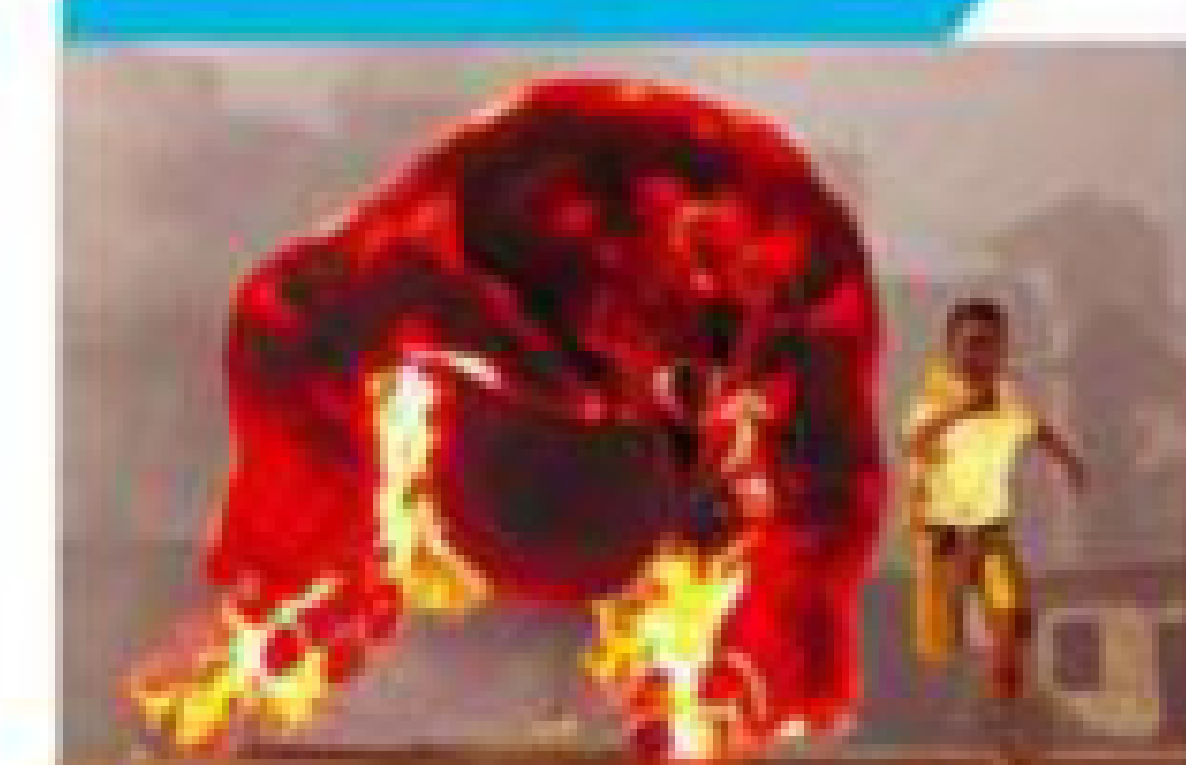
LEFT + RIGHT *Dys4ia* is Anna Anthropy's story about changing gender, helping the player to better understand the process of, and attitudes towards, her sex change



I Get This Call Every Day (below and above) may not be a graphical tour de force, but it makes a point about frustrating work cultures. Its creator questions if we are ready to embrace games based on anything other than enjoyment, but knows this medium is powerful for sharing experiences



FROG GRRR!
The dark realities of alcoholism behind *Papo & Yo*'s fantastical world



Autobiographical games needn't be as literal as *I Get This Call Every Day* and *Dys4ia*. *Papo & Yo* creative director Vander Caballero uses magic, realism and metaphor to examine his upbringing with an alcoholic father. "My goal was to help other people suffering in similar situations," he says. "If I pitched my game as a *Kane & Lynch*, realistic alcoholic father abusing a kid, that wasn't going to fly. People are afraid of confronting the hard topics of life. In every family, talking about the relative who drinks too much is a hard thing. But people aren't afraid to check out what a pink monster will do when he's addicted to frogs."

Creature features

As *Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate* hits Europe, we quiz **Ryozo Tsujimoto** on the franchise's design foundations

With all his talk of tiers, layers and ingredients, **Ryozo Tsujimoto** makes building a *Monster Hunter* game sound like assembling a wedding cake. Yet the series producer insists the monsters are the final step. "The core is obviously the game itself," says Tsujimoto. "What comes after is the background, the stage, and the environment, and then the monster is placed to fit such situations."

The signature beast for current entry *Ultimate* is the armoured Brute Wyvern Brachydios, an imposing plated critter that patrols a volcanic area. It's a contrast to predecessor *Tri*, which was headlined by underwater serpent Lagiacrus. "We wanted to let people enjoy the different flavours of the game," explains Tsujimoto. "That's the purpose of our expansion."

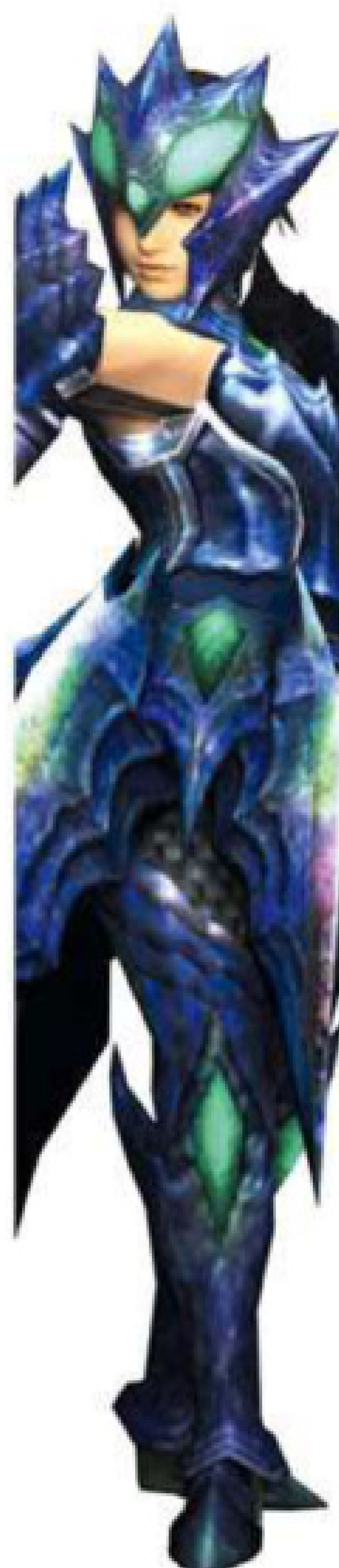
It's not the only one; the game's Wii U and 3DS release is also a way to "widen opportunities for people to pick [it] up". Tsujimoto says players of varying proficiency will be able to play, and it's clear he believes the game will be more welcoming than reputation might suggest. So how does Capcom make *Monster Hunter* inclusive for beginners without compromising its appeal to veterans?

"We have several [difficulty] tiers, so before even attempting Lagiacrus we would advise hunters to play against Royal Ludroth: that monster spends half of its time in water, and half on land. We designed it so you can take these steps and climb them to [reach] the extreme difficulty," says Tsujimoto. Players may follow their own path, in other words, but this game subtly guides them through the basics of monster hunting. Lower-level monsters can almost be considered a tutorial for the high-tier creatures.

Still, when it comes to learning the ropes, Tsujimoto suggests there's no



Ryozo Tsujimoto is keen to stress that *Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate* offers a more inclusive learning curve than *Tri* did



substitute for playing alongside a more experienced hunter. "It's like playing doubles tennis," he muses. "Maybe your partner will [contribute] more, but [they] need you there to participate, to play the game. You can be playing in Wimbledon or you can just be playing in your school courtyard – there are different levels, but the enjoyment doesn't change."

The key is inclusiveness. "When you play with other people, the benefits are always cumulative. Even if you fail your quest, we never penalise players too much. And [if you succeed], *Monster Hunter* doesn't really nominate a star, so everyone has their role they fulfil to their best and they get rewarded for that."

Capcom's introduced several new weapon categories in *Ultimate*, yet each variable brings its own problems. "Each time we add a weapon, we're forced to review every single monster, because we have to [examine] how it fits with that particular weapon," explains

Tsujimoto. "So if we add three or four different categories, we have to do it three or four times over. And you have to consider the [multiplayer] synergy – for example, how does weapon A work in a group with someone using weapon C? We have to think about all these combinations and possibilities, so there's a lot of tuning and balancing involved."

Tsujimoto says the elegant new Dual Blades are popular with female players, while younger combatants favour the Longsword for its resemblance to samurai weaponry. But aesthetics are a secondary concern. While each weapon

must be visually consistent, Tsujimoto insists functionality comes first.

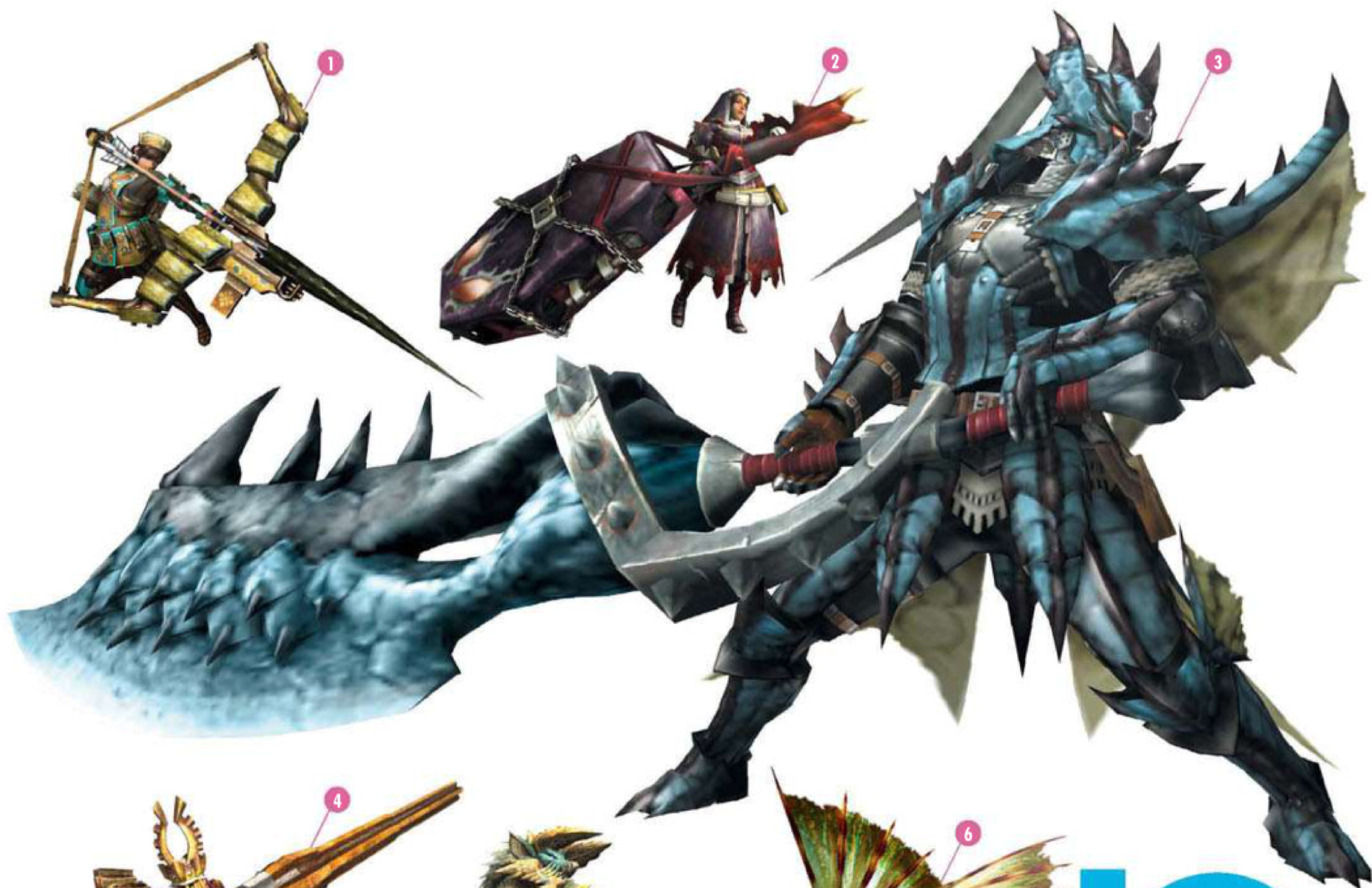
The same goes for new monsters, each of which is designed to fit into the game's diverse ecosystem and fulfil a different role. Some are made to teach novice hunters how to play, while others test intermediate and veteran players' mettle. Building a convincing beast involves studying real-world animal behaviours, physiques and habitats. "Biodiversity and *Monster Hunter* monsters cannot be separated," says Tsujimoto. "Every animal has a certain skeletal structure, skin, scales or fur: all of these elements have meaning as a result of evolution and their environment. So when

fitting monsters into [our] universe, we imagine how a creature would evolve in a particular environment, and how that would affect what they look like and how they behave."

The result is a pattern of behaviour that feels authentic, despite the beasts' fantastical nature.

"Each motion is not just a routine that is cut and pasted," says Tsujimoto. Indeed, these animations perform a dual function: a tilt of the head or sniff of the air is also a tell. Over time, you'll learn to judge when a monster is about to attack, retreat, recharge or – in the case of the Qurupeco, which can mimic the cry of other creatures – call for backup (a process a well-prepared player can interrupt). In that respect, the role of a vigilant hunter is akin to that of a scientist. "Biologists and zoologists observe a creature to learn about them and how they behave," Tsujimoto explains. "We wanted to bring that into this game." ■

"Each time we add a weapon, we're forced to review every monster... there's a lot of tuning involved"



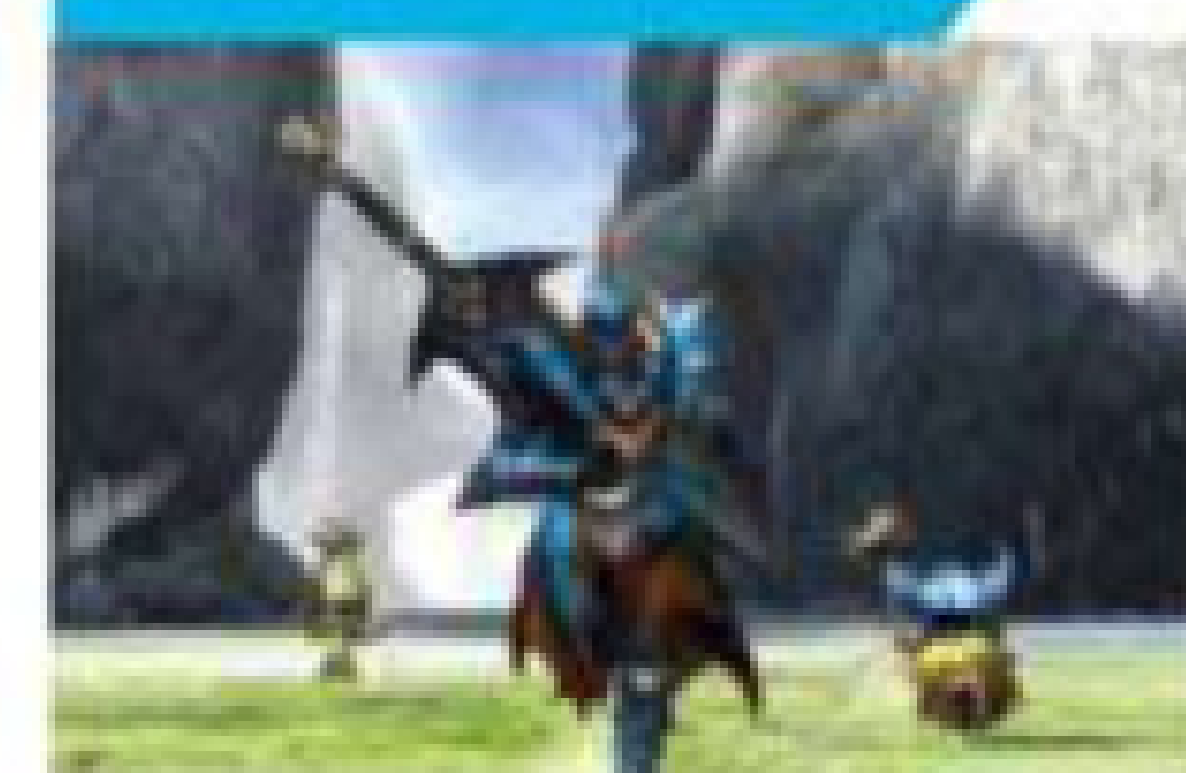
BEAST MODE

Ultimate pits favourites against fresh elements.

- 1 The bow returns.
- 2 Hunting horn notes convey statistical buffs.
- 3 *Ultimate* features 200-plus new weapons and armour pieces.
- 4 The lance includes a shield.
- 5 Zinogre gets a western debut.
- 6 Flash Bombs now work against the Plesioth.
- 7 Low-tier beasts like Lagombi ease new players in.
- 8 Barroth's charge can muddy hunters, slowing them.
- 9 *Ultimate*'s key beast, the mighty Brachydios

DROP HEAVEN?

How does Capcom hit the sweet spot in terms of rare loot?



Getting drops right involves testing and a little bit of luck. "We have hundreds of QA guys come in," says Tsujimoto. "If a material is too rare, we adjust and make sure the stats and the actual feel of the gameplay match – sometimes what you see in the numbers doesn't feel how it [does] in-game." Not that everyone believes the system is fair. "It's Sod's law: when you want something it will never drop; when you don't, it keeps on dropping. The community in Japan reckons we've implemented a secret function that can sense what you want, and then we make sure it doesn't drop!"

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"You mean we spent all this money making a demo and getting it out there and it **cut our sales in half?**"

Yes, that's exactly what happened to you."

Puzzle Clubhouse CEO **Jesse Schell** argues the case for blind anticipation

"I think videogames [are] a bigger problem than guns,

because videogames affect people. But the First Amendment limits what we can do about videogames."

US senator **Lamar Alexander** is unable to think of a single way in which guns might affect people



"Any time anyone tries to link something heinous to videogames, there are **no facts, just emotion.**"

Eidos life president **Ian Livingstone** brushes away blame after pointing out that Japan spends double on gaming per head than the US does, but has a hundred times fewer firearm deaths



"We don't think its a genre problem – it's an execution problem..."

We didn't have the quality of leadership we needed to make [Medal Of Honor] great."

EA chief executive director **Rich Hilleman** breaches and clears the air after Warfighter



ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Mario Kart GP DX
Developer Namco Bandai

Mario Kart Arcade GP DX is the third in Namco Bandai's line of *Mario Kart GP* coin-ops – a series resolutely bound to arcades despite being perfectly timed for GameCube and Wii ports when the first two titles hit arcades across the world in 2005 and 2007.

Housed in a recoloured version of Namco's Wangan MaxiTune 4 cabinet, *Arcade GP DX*'s first location test ran from February 8-11 and production models are due in the summer, though Namco promises regular online updates for balance and patching in new features.

With no hope of a home port, *Arcade GP* has always existed in its own bubble, where Namco takes inspiration from Nintendo's own *Mario Karts* – *GP* from *Mario Kart 64*, *GP 2* from *Mario Kart DS* – then starts from scratch without sharing track or character design.

GP DX's source of inspiration is equal parts *Double Dash* and *Mario Kart 7*, with co-op karting and airborne and aquatic racing, but from that starting point Namco has built a *Taiko No Tatsujin*-themed course, created 100 new power-ups, recoloured Mario's coins and included a handful of characters from its own archives. It's a curious cover version of Nintendo's own kart racer, performed by a band with its own agenda, and a game you'll never play outside of an arcade.





SUPERIOR
BUMPERS



TURBO
FUNCTION



ADVANCED
BATTERY



DUAL
VIBRATION
FEEDBACK



PROGRAMMABLE
FUNCTION BUTTONS

SC-1 control...



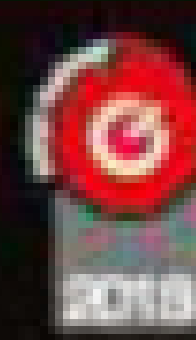
with finesse.

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Featuring an offset thumbstick design similar to the Xbox 360® controllers, a tactile rubberised finish for the ultimate in comfort and rumble technology for immersive gameplay – this controller will help you feel every slam, crash and tackle!

With adjustable sensitivity for superaccurate thumbstick control and precise in-game movement, pressure sensitive buttons for responsive gameplay and a 360° rotating D-pad to allow easy execution of trick shots and moves. Programmable function buttons enable you to set up complex maneuvers so you can score that essential goal or touchdown at the flick of a button! This controller is ideal for use with a wide range of EA sports games such as NHL®, NFL® and FIFA™.

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My favourite game

Jonathan Ross

The TV presenter discusses the parallels between comic books and games, his favourite retro console and playing *Ghouls'n Ghosts* for days on end

Presenter **Jonathan Ross** has been playing and collecting games for over a quarter of a century, amassing an enviable hoard that consumes much of the space in his production company's Camden office. We spoke to him about his prized Japanese Dreamcast and the perks of living with a game reviewer.

How did you get into games?

I played pub arcade games first of all. Then when I got together with Jane [Goldman, Ross's screenwriter wife] about 26 years ago, she had a BBC computer where you programmed the game in yourself, and she used to write for game magazines for a while, too. And that was exciting, mainly because we used to get the games to test. I remember the day *Parodius* came and I thought, 'This is the greatest game ever made.' And it is one of the greatest games ever made, up there with *New Zealand Story*, which I think is vastly underrated. I remember wanting to get the early Nintendo 8bit system – it was really hard to find in the UK for some reason. Anyway, we went shopping together down the Tottenham Court Road and we bought the 8bit Master System and about three or four games, including *Shinobi*, and I fell in love with it. I remember getting very excited when the TurboGrafx came out – or the Core Grafx in Japan – and I bought that specifically so I could get *Splatterhouse*. And the great thing about that machine, of course, was not only that the portables would work with the TV, but also you used the same game for the main home console that you did for the portable.

CULT OF PERSONALITY
Ross's breakthrough came with 1987's *The Last Resort With Jonathan Ross*. He quickly became one of Channel 4's most popular personalities, but used his fame to pursue his love of pop culture. This would lead to 1988's *The Incredibly Strange Film Show*, which focused on cult directors, and 2006's *Japanorama*, which centred on his love of anime and videogames. Ross has hosted the BAFTA Video Games Awards, and recently opened production company Hotsauce Interactive, which released its first game, endless runner *Catcha Catcha Aliens*, in December 2012.



You're clearly a fan of retro games. Do you still play them?

You can get a lot of them on the phone these days, but they're never the same. I've got old Amiga games on here [points to his iPad Mini] and it's just not the same. You need the physical controls and you need that size of the screen. And there's something about it being on a TV screen... But yeah, the favourites still for me are some of the early ones; *R-Type* is one of my favourite games. I quite like some of the upgrades – they made this really dense 3D one for the PlayStation – but the original *R-Type* is still the best. Oh, and *Tatsujin* on the Mega Drive, which was just the most fucking gorgeous upward-scrolling, 16bit, kill-everything game. [And] Jane and I, before we had kids, spent a whole weekend playing *Ghouls'n Ghosts* – a whole weekend in our pyjamas!

You love comic books as well. Do you see any parallels with games?

Well, the popular misconception about gaming is that it's all *Call Of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto*. And there's a similar stigma with anything that has that kind of built-in juvenile quality. Obviously there are comics that are very sophisticated, but [most people's] image of comic books is men in tights swinging or flying through the air. And that's fine, that's part of the appeal, but there'll always be that stigma, even if you say to someone 'Have you read *Alison Bechdel*?' or 'Have you read *Art Spiegelman*?'

I think it's a generational thing. Providing we're still all here in 50 years' time, it won't be an issue. We'll have the same approach in the west that they do in Japan, where you see salarymen reading comics on the train about golf! But this [points to iPhone] has broken down the barriers a lot, because anyone with any kind of smartphone device can play games on it... But you've still got the people who control old media – I'm well versed in this, as you know – and the editors of the newspapers don't play these games.

"You've still got the people who control old media, and the editors of newspapers don't play these games"

The Hotsauce office is quite the treasure trove. What's your rarest piece?

Probably the Dreamcast Divers [2000 CX-1]. This was only released in Japan – [it's a] TV with a built-in [console] and it lights up. And look at the shape of it! The design is just beautiful.

This was made after Dreamcast came out but before [Sega] decided to abandon hardware. There's a dial-up modem for it, and a keyboard to play text-based games and RPGs. There's a camera that goes with it as well for face recognition.

Can you pick a favourite game?

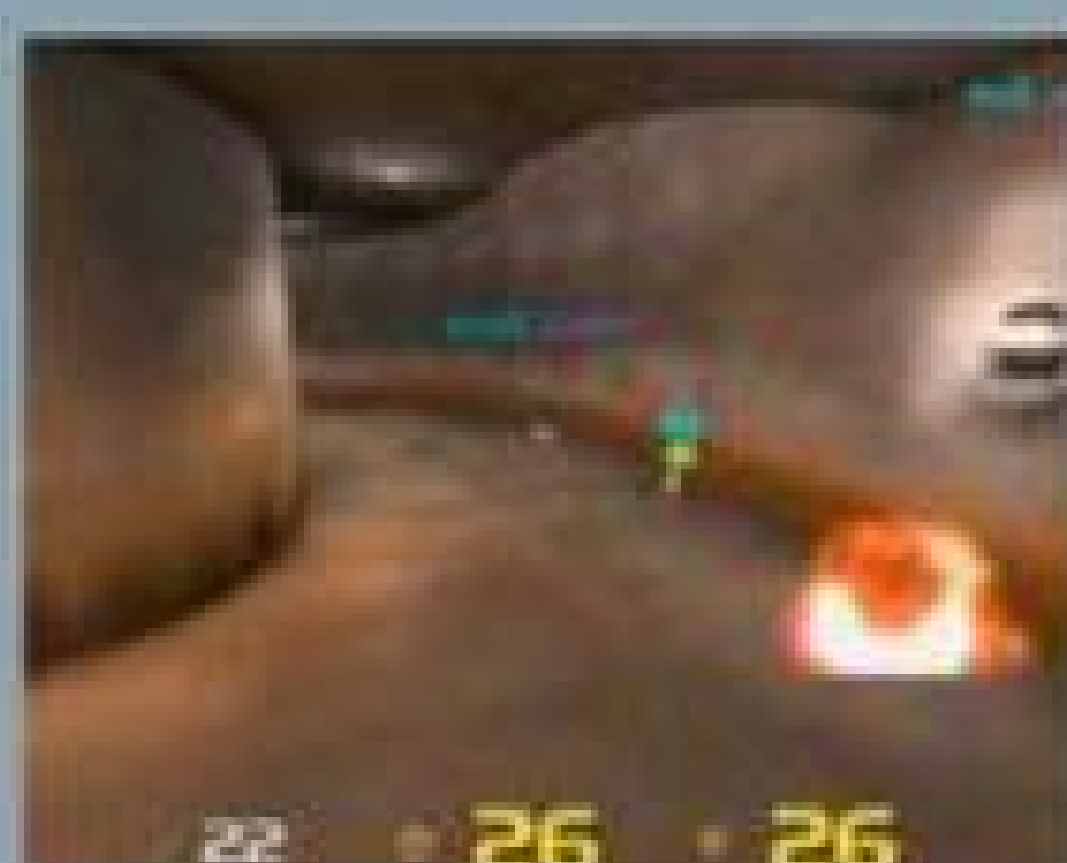
I'd rather give you a top three. It would have to be one of the *Mario* games, probably *Super Mario 64*, which was incredible. Then it would have to be *R-Type*, and then I might go with *Splatterhouse*, just because it was so weird. It looks so clunky by today's standards, but I loved the world. ■



Ross' fondness for pop culture has filled his company's studio with an array of memorabilia, gaming and otherwise

WEBSITE

Johan Vinet
johanvinet.tumblr.com
 When French pixel artist Johan Vinet reached 1,000 followers on Twitter, he made an animated 'thank you' GIF and posted it on his Tumblr. The 16bit-style animation shows a huge mechanised Twitter logo speeding across the surface of the ocean, with a giant afterburner firing from beneath its wing and "1K" stamped on its side like a serial number. It's just one example of his skill in making animated pixel art; elsewhere on his site, you'll find work-in-process videos that show sped-up screen capture of him at work in Photoshop, demystifying the process of how pixel art is created. Most revolves around a game he's currently designing called *Super Squirrel And The Robobirds*. Vinet's talent and enthusiasm does a good job of illuminating the artistic process behind drawing pixels.



VIDEO

ESL Classics:
Rapha vs Cooler
www.bit.ly/15ksyWK
 Many gamers will know something of the incredible dexterity and tactical awareness pro *Quake* players exercise, but it's rare you get to understand their fast-paced, moment-to-moment decisions and strategies as they move through the maps. Here, though, Shane 'Rapha' Hendrixson explains his actions during the final of the 2010 Intel Extreme Masters World Championship in *Quake Live* against Anton 'Cooler' Singov. It provides both fascinating insight and drama as the two athletes clash.

WEB GAME

Not Pacman
www.bit.ly/UclAOH
 It's been suggested that any game can be made more fun with the simple addition of physics. As if to test this theory, the merry pranksters at stabyourself.net have released an updated version of the iconic *Pac-Man* arcade game. The twist is that instead of having control of Pac-Man himself, you now only have control over the field of play, which can be tilted and flipped by dragging the mouse left and right. Gravity sends Pac-Man rolling down corridors of the maze, munching pills as he normally would. With the game a bit easier than the original, because the ghosts are tumbling about instead of actively pursuing you, the challenge revolves primarily around how fast you can clear the board of pills. Is it better than the original? Well, no, but it's worth the experiment.



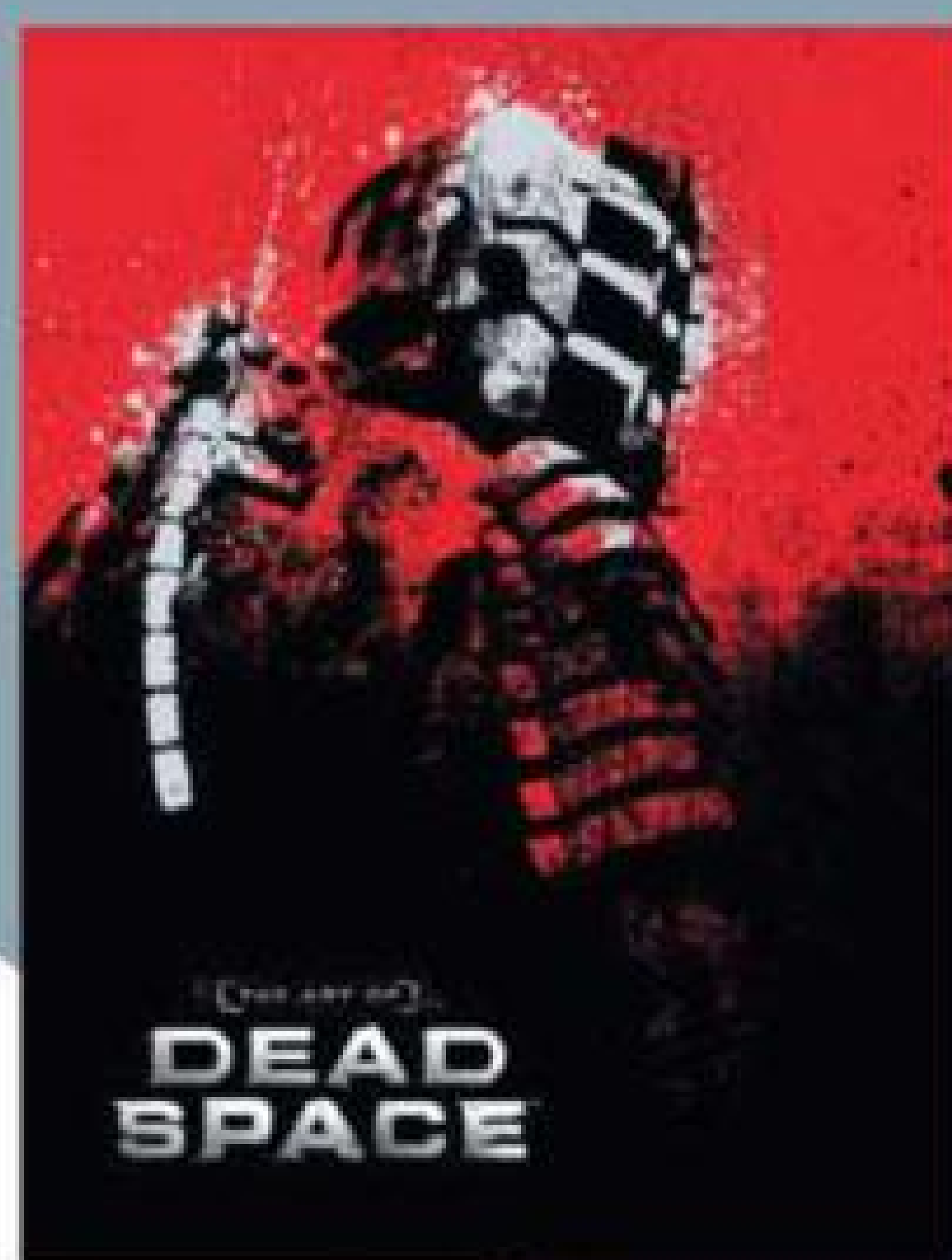
THIS MONTH ON EDGE

The cluster of chattels that piqued our attention during the production of E252

THE ART OF DEAD SPACE

www.bit.ly/YZKeTj

For the world of a survival-horror game to feel scary, it must first feel believable. The creative minds behind Visceral Games' *Dead Space* series have taken this challenge seriously from the very start, and *The Art of Dead Space* drives this fact home with the force of a pneumatic mining drill. Across nearly 200 glossy, full-colour pages, readers are treated to an avalanche of concept art. Most pages form a parade of grotesqueries – human faces peeling apart to reveal fleshy, tentacled parasites – but you also get some arresting glimpses into the starry void of space and the intricate trimmings of *Dead Space 2*'s Unitology cathedrals.



continue

PS4 reveal

Two hours of constant revelations and smooth presentation for those attending the show

Next gen in sight

PCs might be ascendent, but we still get that thrill

Luigi cosplay

By donning a Luigi cap for Nintendo Direct, Iwata officially won Best Gaming President Ever

Hotline's beats

We're still bobbing our heads uncontrollably

quit

PS4 reveal

Two hours of awkward staging and Twitter snark for those streaming the show

PS3's retirement

Could we really already be feeling nostalgic?

Gearbox hate

Sure, *Aliens: Colonial Marines* is a mess, but please don't geyser such toxic epithets

Valve departures

How does it go? "Tired of Valve, tired of life"?

TWEETS

"Video: Designing puzzles that make players feel smart" – what about trying to make players actually be smart?

Michael Brough, @smestorp
 Game developer, Corrypt

Game Where Character Looks At His Bloodied Hands And Literally Asks Aloud, "What Have I Become?" Nominated For Writing BAFTA

Anthony Burch, @reverendanthony
 Game writer, Gearbox

So, piracy can't be avoided and all, but do people reeeeeally need to link the pirated versions on my Facebook page? What are they thinking?

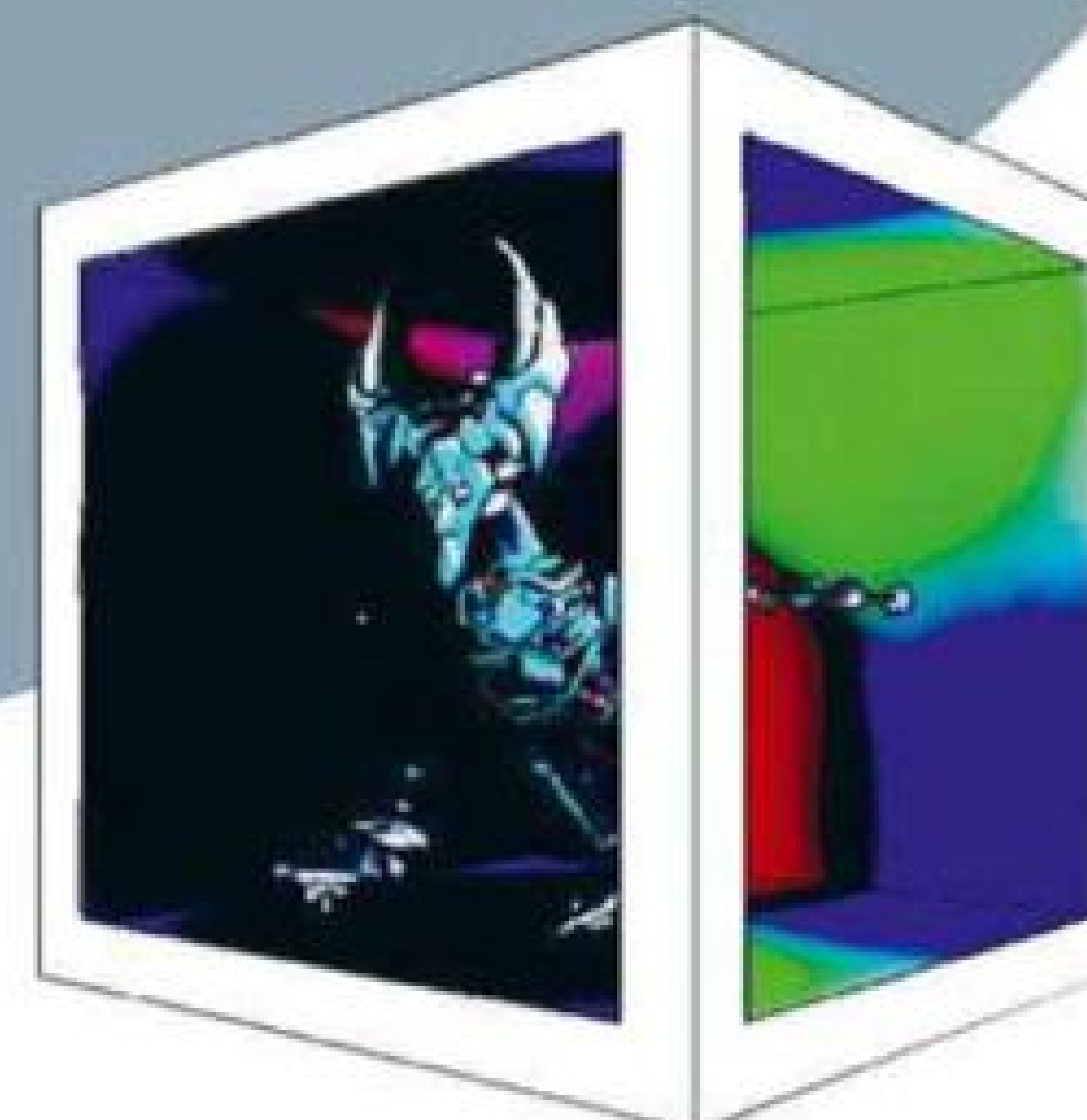
Alexander Bruce, @demruth
 Game developer, Antichamber

I see that some of Valve's employees have decided to fire themselves.

Daniel Cassidy, @danielcassidy
 Indie developer



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DISPATCHES

APRIL

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers discuss us overlooking Toys For Bob in the Edge Developer Awards, the ongoing joys of handheld gaming, some next-gen marketplace considerations, and how Sega and Gearbox have betrayed our trust. In Perspective, **Steven Poole**  explores touch-based design in the context of *The Room*, **Leigh Alexander**  believes the dated lexicon of gaming has lost its currency, and **Brian Howe**  takes a frightening look at a world where Reggie Fils-Aimé's idea of reviewing is real.



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EDGE



Issue 251

Dialogue

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Nod to Bob?

Hey **Edge**, didn't you miss Toys For Bob off your best developers list? They could have chucked out a rubbish game and let Activision's marketing take care of sales. But anyone who's sat down with a child and played *Skylanders* will testify to the small developer's pursuit of excellence. Going by current trends, *Skylanders* should have been a cynical, soulless and short-lived cash-in on the 'toys to life' gimmick. But Toys For Bob have shoved two fingers up to that, creating an experience that's captivating for children; managed the revolutionary, wholly satisfying integration of physical toys; and still made a game that can be enjoyed by a 38-year-old. For this reason, Toys For Bob should have been near the top of your list. Fingers crossed Activision doesn't screw it up by abusing the current goodwill towards the brand.

Paul Forsythe

[Our discussions over the final list were, shall we say, passionate, and Toys For Bob](#)

[was a major contender. There's always next year, if it can continue improving the series.](#)

Established handhelds

Being of the age to have prised open an original Game Boy one Christmas morning, I can't help but feel that asking if handheld gaming will take off is akin to asking if this Internet fad will ever replace Ceefax.

I love a good sit on the couch, with HD visuals and surround sound blasting me into wherever it is I want to be. However, as I have moved forward from the wide-eyed lad that ripped open that brick of a Game Boy and slammed *Tetris* into it, and transformed into the sensible-shoed, shirt-and-tie-wearing adult with a job, I have also moved away from being the only one trying to lay a claim on the entertainment hub that in my day used to just be called 'the telly'. And especially now that every device in the house seems to want to encourage me to stream to the big screen or plug it into it for reasons I can't fathom.

The Vita was a whim purchase of mine that involved trading in a whole stack of console games I'd barely had a chance to play due to the time constraints that appear to come with getting older. I admit I'd never played an *Uncharted* game, and I was blown away by the way it looked compared with the stuff I'd previously enjoyed on a phone or handheld. Similarly, *Rayman*, *Everybody's Golf*, *Wipeout* and even the Minis and old PS1 games available to me on the store all looked great. I found that for the first time in years I was actually completing most games I was playing. And, unlike games from my phone, they weren't five-minute timesinks designed to keep me entertained for a short blast, or charming but low-res puzzle games.

The great appeal to me is that I can just pause it mid-game, and stroll off to return to it later on. As it's a personal experience; I can happily sit in a shared room on it, content that I am either not off having to hide in another room to indulge in my pastime, or being accused of neglecting anyone!

More importantly, I am safe in the knowledge no one will be demanding to watch X-Factor or some other dross on it just as I am seven minutes into a game of *FIFA*, with no consideration for the integrity of my online ranking or the fact I haven't saved recently and have just started a 27-minute, unskippable cutscene.

Handheld gaming doesn't always mean outside or 'on the bus' (as people always seem to mention as the only reasonable place you can play a game outside the house). With phone screens getting bigger, tablets becoming widespread and consoles trying to change the way we control them, handheld gaming has only grown stronger – just not in the ways traditional gamers expected.

Kev Mason

[We're fans of the Vita sofa experience as well, although we're hoping a future firmware update boosts the volume limit to drown out big-screen caterwauling once and for all.](#)

Generation game

Who will 'win' the next-gen console war depends on a few factors: access to exclusive and thirdparty games (including thirdparty support and the quality of said exclusives), the price of each console, and perhaps most importantly, how the content is delivered.

If purchasing games goes entirely digital, the price of each title will be set in stone – eradicating any hope of finding it anywhere cheaper – as my guess is that there will be one specific go-to place in which to buy games (like the eShop or Xbox Live Marketplace). This could make or break the industry, depending on how the public reacts: some may love the idea of having a collection of games tied to their account that can never be lost or damaged, while collectors will feel cheated by paying a premium price and not having a physical copy to show for it, and the possibility of games being locked to one console might make some reluctant to invest at all.

One thing I think might completely devastate the sales of games in general is the rumour that an Internet connection will be required to 'check' a customer's copy is legitimate. This would effectively mean the customer asking for permission to use something that they have bought every time they want to use it. This so-called 'feature' is one that I'm sure many will find insulting and frustrating in equal measures.

I think that each of the next-generation consoles has the potential to deliver a constant stream of quality content, and that both will be successful in their own right – but in different ways – and for now it is

impossible to predict what the future has in store. There are bound to be exclusive games and features for each system that will entice varied audiences. But the presence of a system that locks games to a specific console and the possible need for the consoles to be connected to the Internet 100 per cent of the time just to verify that loyal paying customers haven't stolen the game they're wanting to play are travesties.

Ash Baker

You're absolutely right about console-locked content and always-on DRM. Anti-piracy measures that restrict paying customers are just dumb. Luckily, neither applies to purchases on your prize Vita.

ET: egregiously terrible

For the first time in ages, I preordered a non-triple-A game. It was *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (A:CM). I had seen the demo play, seen it had also taken years to develop and was coming with Gearbox and Sega labels on it – and was more than a little familiar with the source material. So, in summary, it was all looking good.

I don't want to go into all the bugs, or why it is a poor game. Look at this from a customer service and options viewpoint – and I hope Sega/Gearbox take note. The reason why Sony sells more TVs than Cello is because most people aren't electronic engineers, so trust the brand of Sony to deliver what it says it does. Most people have simply not heard of Cello, and therefore don't trust it as a brand (yet). Trust plus name recognition is in essence what a brand is. Brands ignore this implied trust from their customers at their peril.

As for customer options, I have bought games from the App Store that have turned out to not be my thing, but for £1.99, I don't really mind – I've got my money's worth. However, £35 creates a certain *Halo 4* or *Gears Of War* level of expectation. Set a price at £20 and I know it will be rough round the edges – fair enough. But £35 could buy other types of entertainments: pizzas and a few beers with the wife at a local restaurant, or we could go to the movies and buy popcorn. Perhaps a fairer comparison is that a DVD

boxset of the latest HBO masterpiece would cost about the same and take as long to watch as playing through the campaign of A:CM. It would also be more fun.

So where Sega/Gearbox have fallen down is that they have set a level of expectation and failed to deliver on it, lowering my trust. To be kind, their demo of gameplay appears to be substantially better than what finally came out (this is odd, since generally graphics get better in development, not worse). Then, after everyone has preordered this game, we get the insider info describing development as a 'train wreck' – that would have been far more useful to know a few days before release! Then there are the suspicious five-star reviews out there. Many of the people giving this game five stars on Amazon seem to have started reviewing things just days before the release of this game. Could this be the dark arts of PR or stats boosting? If so, then it isn't the first time and sadly won't be the last, but it insults the

intelligence of gamers. Nobody can call this game 'amazing' with a straight face. Even its developers post-launch have been cautious with their praise.

Ultimately, the story appears to be that the developers knew it was poor, but just kept going for a launch. I am realistic and have been in business myself for a number of years, so I know a company deserves a return on

investment. Also, the very point of marketing is there to push sales, emphasising the good and glossing over the bad. But if all this is done without any thought for customer satisfaction then it backfires. There's a difference between commercial concerns and cynical manipulation. The end result this time is their image is now tarnished. I feel ripped off and I won't believe anything these companies have to say again until after their product is available and fairly reviewed. Everyone loses.

Jem Duducu

The sales figures have been remarkable – the best in the UK this year so far, as we go to press. Those who preordered put blind faith in Sega, Aliens and Gearbox's brands, and this time it didn't pay off. Perhaps it's all a reminder of the value of reviews.

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No Vita price drop in North America

Just do it already Sony! The more people they can get to buy into Vita now, the more people are likely to buy into PS4 on launch. TAKE THE HIT DAMMIT!
Steve Deacon, Facebook

It's already dropped majorly in my country. The wifi Vita used to cost 250 euros (just the handheld). I bought mine for 213. Then there were deals where you would get the wifi Vita + LBP Vita + 4GB card for 240 euros. And now the wifi Vita costs 188 euros. That's a big difference if you ask me.
Marion Emeis, Facebook

They gotta drop it, or at least bundle it in with the console when the PS4 comes out, if they really want people to get behind this remote play thing. Getting consumers to pay full price for both consoles would be just plain mean.
Danny Goulter, Facebook

PS4 reveal

I really don't get why everyone was so hung up on them not showing the box itself. That's the least interesting thing about any console. Nintendo's original Wii U reveal didn't show the box either, and minimal fuss was made about that because it didn't matter.
Michael Irving, Facebook

I don't mind not seeing it but I think a lot of the more mainstream consumers will be bothered by how it looks next to their TV. Also, passionate gamers just want to know everything about it as soon as possible so I can see the frustration. This will probably be the last console that is a physical box anyway.

Tom Seymour, Facebook

Aliens: Colonial Marines got squished in reviews, but will it really affect Gearbox's image? It will for Jem Duducu at least





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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

What springing The Room's safe reveals about touch-based play and atmospheric design

Why am I in this room? It's an old, dark place, harshly illuminated by photographer's lights, with a strange, ornate box on a central plinth. As I walk around the plinth, scrutinising the box, I forget my own body: I am floating easily and smoothly through space, which is a more naturalistic representation of movement while concentrating than the nodding-dog judder-cam of any thirdperson shooter. If I have a body at all, it is merely an extension of my mind. And my mind is what this game is playing with.

Fascinating iPad production *The Room* has been called a room-escape game, but that is really a retrospective imposition. Rather than trying to get out of the room, you are trying to get into the box, or rather the Russian-doll

nested series of boxes crammed with mechanical tricks and puzzles, constantly sprouting new nooks, dials, levers and knobs, or flowering into a beautiful mechanical orrery. It's a box-penetration game. Videogame boxes are usually dumb wooden barrels or crates that smash into a thousand splinters if you so much as glare at them sarcastically, or chests that require a single fetched key or crest. But *The Room*'s box really means business. It's a hyperbox.

Our mode of penetrating this box – by manipulating its representation with our actual fingers – puts to shame most phone and tablet games, which are still designed around old controller paradigms: touch emulates sticks and buttons or point-and-click mousing. This can work tolerably well (such as in the one-finger movement of Llamasoft's delicious old-school shooter *Super Ox Wars*), but it's always a compromise. *Angry Birds* and *Fruit Ninja* broke free of such fetters, but it's the unprecedented richness and phenomenological credibility of *The Room*'s touch system that has had reviewers enthusing over how tactile it feels. This is owed in part to the game's potent amplification of input, which – despite the touch gestures' roughly one-to-one mapping to the virtual objects – is apparent in two ways. First, you can pull out a heavy drawer or rotate a crank with feather-light caresses; second, amplification of input is built into the virtual box itself: you do something small, and the whole elaborate mechanism suddenly reconfigures itself with a grinding of mysterious gears, which is at once the reward for your success and the instant apparition of a new enigma.

Such an intelligent fusion of touch and fiction will always put touch as an add-on gimmick to shame. No one at all enjoyed doing the tedious brass-rubbings in *Uncharted Golden Abyss*. As I write, rumours of the PS4 suggest that its controller will have a touch-strip where the select and start buttons are on a DualShock 3. But a sceptic might remember how few developers continued to use Sixaxis motion control on PS3 once it became clear that players didn't really like it – except, of course, for those tremendously exciting 'keep your balance while walking across a log'

moments that are the much-loved high point of any jungly-corridor exploration game.

Fireproof Games has also provided a masterclass in dramatic minimalism. It is impressive how cinematic *The Room* manages to be by eschewing what we normally take to be cinematic paraphernalia. There is no FMV; instead, pieces of backstory leak out through your gradual discovery of pages from someone's journal, as though in a Gothic novel. The music and sound design contribute a beautifully understated unease, while the strange goggles that provide you with rotting-green supernatural vision deepen the virtual world's information density in very clever ways. And you are not remote-controlling an avatar; you aren't even playing a character, so it feels all the more as though it is just you and the box, in this room, wondering what kind of sadistic Jigsaw-style mastermind has set you up. *The Room* is cinematic not because it tries to cast you in a narrative-driven movie, but because it thrusts you into an intriguing situation. The pane of glass separating you and the world rapidly dissolves.

Just as important is the fact that success in *The Room* does not demand dexterity or speed. We are used to even quite cerebral adventure games being heavily predicated on fine and rapid motor control, but a thoughtful recent article by Ben Taber at the Problem Machine blog raised the question of whether this – as well as considerations of, say, gender –

was not also a diversity issue. After all, different people have different physical capabilities. Yet games, Taber writes, "have largely been designed such that only those with above-average dexterity can do well in them". That doesn't mean that designers shouldn't make twitch games, he concludes; simply that they could be more aware that they are excluding people by doing so. Well, it's surely the case that more people will be able to play *The Room* than will be able to complete the new *Tomb Raider*. And, with no disrespect to Lara Croft and her lovable wildlife-murdering antics, that should be a cause for celebration, as Fireproof's admirers happily await what subtle new terrors are to come.

Steven Poole is the author of *Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames*. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Most of the terms we use in relation to gaming culture are archaic, and that's no bad thing

My school days seem like a lifetime ago, especially if I measure the distance in terms of my relationship to games. At age ten or 11, my most prized possession was a dog-eared *Phantasy Star II* 'hint book', a strategy guide of sorts to a cruel, inscrutable towns-and-dungeons JRPG. I still marvel when I think about how all it took then was some pixel portraits, a few blocks of clumsy but sufficiently evocative text, and pages and pages of mazelike maps to pull me into that world. I spent summers studying the maps, traversing routes in ballpoint pen.

One day, I called my sister into the room, shouting: I had broken through the Crevice to Alplatin, after spending days scraping hard-worn inches of progress. And she came running in and tripped over the cord and

unplugged the Genesis. She still remembers how intensely I lost my temper at her.

In high school, being a gamer was a bit like belonging to an anarchic underground, where you found your allies and spread your lore in whispers. Gaming could unite otherwise-disparate loners around some device in some basement after school. It was a secret language. We know this. We were hardcore gamers.

When I became an employed, semi-adult young woman in the chaotic metropolis of New York City, I remember thinking that connected consoles, Wi-Fi-enabled portables, would be a way for me to find 'people like me' in the crowd. I reasoned that connectivity, like a magic spell, would unearth the gleaming infrastructure that tied all gamers together, bring it out into the open, make it cool.

I never fulfilled that Nintendo fantasy of finally playing *Pokémon* with smiling strangers in a café. Everyone plays videogames, now, but I think those of us who play and make them are still acclimating to what that actually looks like in reality.

It's increasingly out-of-fashion to use the word 'gamer' these days – that kind of proud self-labelling has begun to summon negative connotations. Much of the embarrassing hostility and childish, abusive behavior we see in our culture online can be traced to misguided pride in the gamer identity, an insular refusal to welcome change, and many people have reacted by divorcing themselves from the label.

Others find the term increasingly irrelevant to the new and broader role gaming has begun to adopt in culture – people don't identify themselves solely as 'book-readers' or 'movie-goers' when those media are components of a healthy entertainment diet; the word 'gamer' starts to feel like needless boundary-drawing around something that's becoming inclusive whether everyone likes it or not.

Who is a hardcore gamer now? Although we might have once described this or that one big MMOG or franchise FPS as a 'core' game, it's easy and accepted these days to be interested in the titles that get TV and Tube adverts. Toy shops feature entire sections devoted to *Angry Birds* and *Minecraft*. Even those FPS franchises are pervasive, liminal – and fraught, possibly saturated, unfashionable.

In high school, being a gamer was a bit like belonging to an anarchic underground

How do we define the core? People into sci-fi and fantasy? Maybe, but popular TV would seem to make that a broad assignation these days. People who spend more time and money than other people on videogames? Perhaps, but that would make a *CityVille* junkie more core than someone who likes a little multiplayer online battle arena session with friends once or twice a month.

If it isn't the game's theme, the player's commitment, or the economic weight of a game that defines a core player any more, maybe it's the depth and complexity of the games they like? Hmm, but then triple-A publishers have spent a console generation trying to make games more accessible and intuitive for the broader audience they need to leverage against increasing dev budgets. Complexity is no longer inherently desirable outside of a rapidly fragmenting set of niche audiences. And what's 'depth' anyway? Some of the most engaging and enduring games are quite simple at face value.

It's popular to debate even the word 'game' these days, a conflict that's probably part of the runoff that comes with definitions changing everywhere. Games like *Dear Esther* or *Proteus* have garnered much discussion and acclaim – but just as many conversations about whether or not they 'are games', because they focus on exploration and interpretation versus set goals.

The particularly interesting thing about the 'what's a game?' debate is that people abreast of experimental indie design culture and small, boundary-pushing releases are probably this age's most committed game fans. They're the ones speaking obscure names, evangelising unsung secrets and feeling little-understood in school or in the workplace where everyone has heard of *Minecraft* but not of *Dys4ia*.

Core, once a very tidy term that defined an audience segment, is the next buzzword set to be reupholstered as we enter a veritable revolution in hardware and business models. The remapping of our understanding of the audience is one of the most exciting frontiers to emerge from the mainstreaming of games – and perhaps one major takeaway is that terms are useless nowadays.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media

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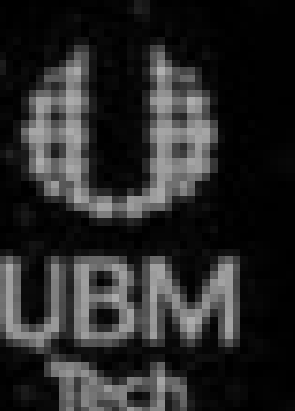


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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

Matching the ideal reviewer to a game or system is a dark art, as these samples prove

Blowing off criticisms of the Wii U to CNBC, Nintendo of America president Reggie Fils-Aime said: "Reviews of a system or reviews of a game really come down to the quality and capability of the reviewer."

Smurf Rescue. Reviewer: The New England Journal of Osteoporosis. "Don't be fooled by the kiddie licence. This ColecoVision title is a harrowing examination of a medical disorder that affects millions around the world: brittle bone disease. The Smurfs, usually so spry, are clearly afflicted with acute cases of osteogenesis imperfecta, their blue bodies crumpling like tissue if they so much as brush against a fence, fern, or blade

of grass. Even the impact of their feet gingerly striking the ground splinters tiny metatarsals, constantly sapping their energy meters. But they heroically press on, just like their real-world counterparts. The game concludes with a thrilling boss battle against a motionless skull you must jump over, a high-stakes manoeuvre when your skeleton is made of ancient papyrus." **10**

BioShock. Reviewer: Mum.

"OK, where is my guy? Why can't I see him? Oh, I'm looking through him. Why isn't he going anywhere? I'm jerking the controller all over the place and he's just standing there. You have to press this knob to make him go? That's too hard, I can't do tha— OK, I'm going. I'm running into the wall. I'm running into the wall. Wait, now I'm moving. This place is dark. Why do they make it so dark? Is that blood? Is that screaming? Have you called your grandmother lately? Her birthday's in two months. Where am I supposed to go? I don't like this game, there's nothing to— Oh, there's something! How do I shoot? Hold down this, point with that and then shoot with the other thing? That's too hard, I can't do tha— Oh, I'm shooting! I'm shooting all over the place! Did I get it? What do you mean it's an 'en-pee-cee'? I don't want to hear about that. Talk to it? 'Hello, you there, en-pee-cee!' Not like that? Then how do I — Eeeeek! Something's getting me! Why can't I run? I'm jerking my controller up over my head! Jump! Jump! Jump! Which button shoots, this one on the back? Oh no, I made the batteries fall out! Do you have Zumba?" **1**

Enjoy Your Massage! Reviewer: A pervert.

"Like most of you, I had a dream. But unlike most of you, it wasn't a dream I could share with the world. Ever since I was very small, my heart's desire has been to play a thinly veiled version of the electronic memory game Simon on a furious woman's nude back. I never dared to hope anyone would make a game about this. But thanks to *Enjoy Your Massage!*, I can finally live out my wildest dream, rather than playing memory games in my head on the backs of unwary women on the Tube. For someone with my unique qualities and capabilities, it really is the perfect game." **10**

Portal. Reviewer: A troglodyte.

"Me no like game! Game too hard! Nothing to bonk with rocks! It like, 'Physics puzzles? Me literally think own shadow is monster.' GARGLEBLARRR! And hiding woman talk too much, want to find and drag by hair! Me no get deadpan humour; me like jokes about bonking, or making fun of trendy stuff like fire and burying dead, and rocks! RAHHHHHKS! Here is real joke: what rock say to man on fire? Bonk! JOOOOOOKE! Still, me give one point for shiny disc, good to distract predators and woo mates too large to bonk with ro— AHHHH! SHADOW! ME RUN NOW!" **1**

Myst (Nintendo DS port). Reviewer: A drinking-bird toy.

"Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap." **10**

Mega Man 2. Reviewer: Luigi

"Whoo-hoo! Moving platforms, pits: this all looks-a pretty familiar. No-a problem, let's a-go! I'll easily leap over this-a pit and— Mamma mia! Luigi dropped like-a stone! The gravity here, it's-a so strange. But Luigi is not afraid! Yippee! Now I'm-a moving! Here comes a robot. Piece of a-cake. I'll just jump a-right onna its head and— Che macello! It's-a shooting at poor a-Luigi! Mr. Robot, a-why don't you just a-walk a-slowly to and fro? Whee-hee! This is a tense moment! Backflip! But Luigi is a-brave! I'll just hit this round a-spiky block to power up— Luigi exploded! This-a game's-a

too hard-a. It's-a exacerbating-a Luigi's faux-ethnic a-speech impediment-a! Yahoo!" **3**

Xbox 360. Reviewer: Swifty The Marmoset.

"Because I lack the opposable thumbs necessary to operate the control pad, this system is basically useless to me except as an expensive poo depository — and yes, I'm aware of Kinect." **2**

Wii U. Reviewer: Reggie Fils-Aime.

"There has been a range of comments and commentary. But when I go on Miiverse and see how consumers are reacting to games like *ZombiU* or *Call Of Duty*, that tells me we're doing something very, very positive." **10**

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including *Pitchfork* and *Kill Screen*



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Relative constraints

Naughty Dog's Amy Hennig has said in the past that *Uncharted's* linearity is a necessity, claiming that only by exerting absolute control over the player's path through a game can she tell the story she wants to tell. The studio seems content to continue ploughing its rigid furrow in *The Last Of Us* (p52), albeit with a much darker tone than the cheery matinee adventures of games past.

Hennig's is a fair point, but with each new Naughty Dog game selling better than the last, must the studio – and its players – still be bound by the same constraints? Dontnod creative director Jean-Maxime Moris admits that *Remember Me* (p48) is linear in an *Uncharted* sort of way because his young Parisian studio lacks the resources to tell its cyberpunk story in an open setting.

Perhaps Naughty Dog is waiting for the next gen to loosen the reins. Moris is right when he says there are only a few companies on the planet with the means to mix open worlds and strong stories. Ubisoft is one, and it's telling that, after current consoles buckled under the weight of *Assassin's Creed III's* broad ambition, the series' fourth numbered

instalment, *Black Flag* (p56) has a finer focus. It, like *The Last Of Us*, squeezes one more game from ageing tech before we all move onto new hardware.

Bungie has no such luxury. In *Destiny* (p42) it is building not just an engine but an entire universe, too, one made by 350 staff to span four games and ten years. With the promise of seamless, invisible matchmaking on multiple planets, *Destiny* has few barriers, but there are still constraints for its creators. Working across two generations of hardware is one. Trying to recapture the lightning in a bottle of *Halo* and attract the playerbase of a *World Of Warcraft* are two more. But the fear of making what would be one of the costliest mistakes in videogame history if it all goes wrong is probably the biggest.

MOST WANTED

GTAV 360, PS3

September 17 it is, then. *GTAV's* proposed spring release always felt optimistic, given how little of the game had been publicly shown (and Rockstar's history of delays). Now the question is: will the game remain exclusive to PS3 and 360, or make the jump to next gen?

Thief 4 TBC

A replay of *The Metal Age*, combined with happy memories of scampering around Dunwall in *Dishonored*, has made us impatient to see Eidos Montreal's take on the masterly and atmospheric open-ended stealth game.

Witcher 3: Wild Hunt PC, PS4

An early gauntlet has been thrown at next-generation world builders. *The Witcher 3* is a massive open-world RPG where Geralt The White Wolf is at last cast as a hunter, pursuing the spectral killers of the Wild Hunt and tracking his own prey through a land that dwarfs *The Witcher 2* and *Skyrim*.



H | Y
P | E

DESTINY

Bungie's shared adventure needs
to be an astronomical success

Publisher	Activision
Developer	Bungie
Format	360, PS3, PS4
Origin	US
Release	2014

Europa was a human colony, but we abandoned it when the invaders struck and now our structures are lost beneath the ice. Jupiter fills the skybox in dramatic fashion, one of many such spectacular views designed by skybox artist Mark Goldsworthy. And like every map in the game, Europa is subject to daylight, darkness and the ravages of a persistent weather system

StoreM

EDGE





DESTINY

RIGHT In-engine footage shown at *Destiny's* reveal implies that Bungie has elected to follow *Call Of Duty* in mapping a quick zoom on the left trigger rather than reuse the classic scope system that served the studio through five *Halos*



Destiny is not, as Activision CEO **Eric Hirschberg** jokes, “the best-kept secret in the history of secrets”. Its artwork was leaked, a teaser was found in *ODST* and the contract behind it became evidence in Activision’s court case with Ex-Infinity Ward heads Jason West and Vince Zampella. *Destiny* was a game with too few secrets until its official debut last month in Bellevue, Washington, when it suddenly had too many.

For now, Bungie’s next shooter is a story and an online hook backed by a world of tech and talent. *Destiny* begins centuries after the arrival of The Traveler — a moon-sized alien sphere that kick-started a golden age of space exploration and the colonisation of our solar system. That age came to an end when a series of alien invaders drove humanity back to the last surviving human city, The City, safe in the shadow of the long-dormant Traveler.

A lifetime later, teams of Guardians venture beyond The City’s walls to explore the ruins of Earth and the colonies of Mars, Venus and Europa. In your war against the creatures who have stolen humanity’s homes,

you’ll cross paths with other players, because *Destiny* will pull strangers from across the world into your game. Those strangers might stand and fight with you before moving on, join your party and stick around, or decide to just walk on to someone else’s game.

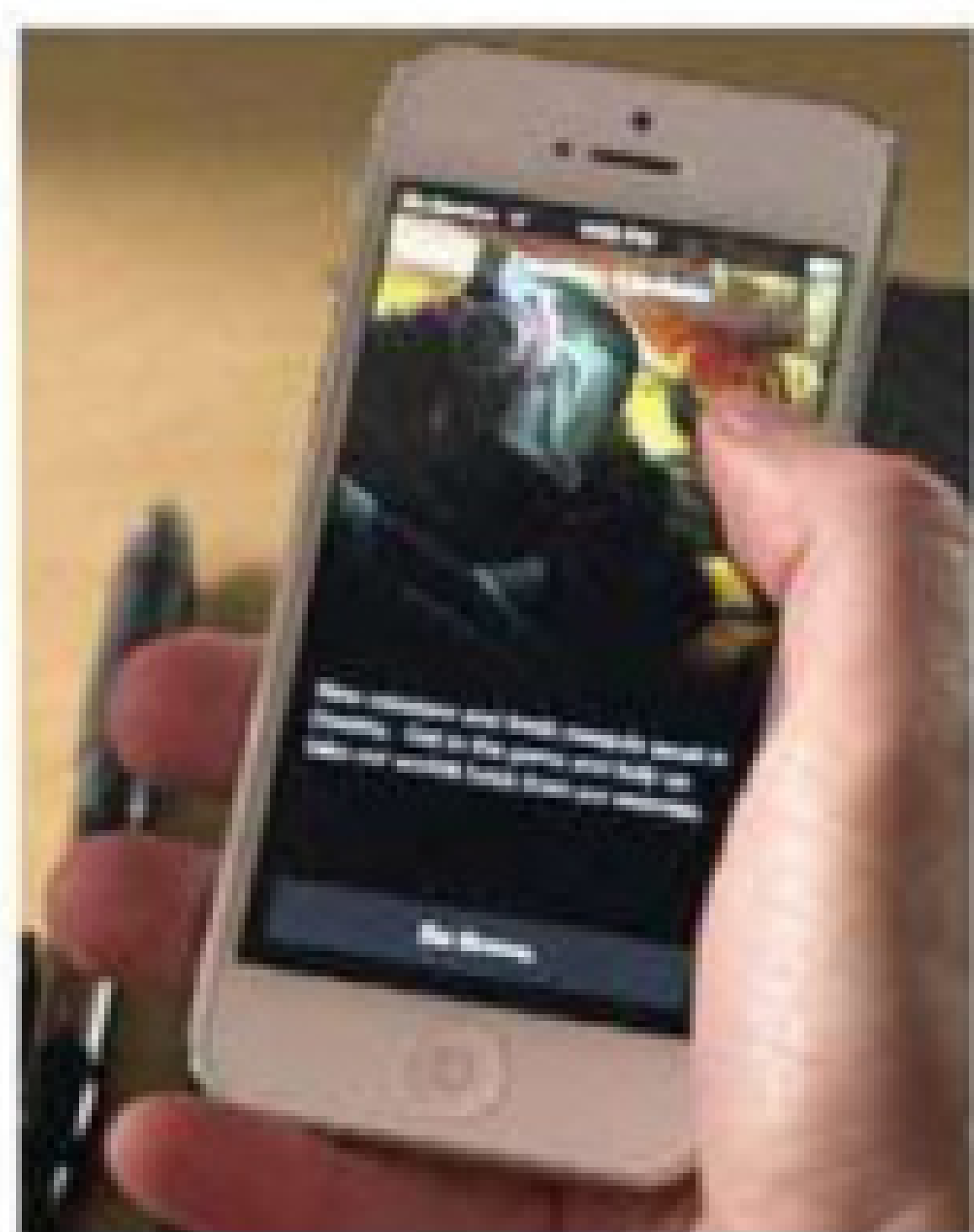
“For *Halo 1*, we very deliberately did a bunch of radical things to [the] FPS,” says project director and Bungie co-founder **Jason Jones**. “We limited you to two weapons, we made your health recharge, we saved the game automatically and restored it instantaneously. And so the question was, ‘How do we take a genre we love and turn it on its head again?’”

Turning the FPS on its head apparently takes RPG mechanics, customisation, mobile apps, social networks and an unprecedented level of connectivity. “We’ve learned our lessons from MMOGs and Facebook games,” says Jones. “Good ideas aren’t the problem. Fitting it in to one coherent experience? That’s the problem. I believe we can change again what people think about shooters. We didn’t want to do anything less than that.”



The lessons taken from a decade’s worth of *Halo* development are the foundation for the technology behind Bungie’s new universe. The studio’s map editor, GrognoK, works like virtual Lego, quickly merging intersecting surfaces and carving holes for doors, halving the time it would take to build a similar structure with *Halo: Reach*’s tools. Bungie and Nvidia Research collaborated on the game’s realtime lighting and what the studio calls

BELOW Costume elements, weapons, vehicles and your own personal spaceship will reflect the stories you craft inside *Destiny's* universe



Another destination

Destiny has an tie-in app from which you'll be able to customise your character and communicate with friends, but these are the least of its features, says community manager **Eric Osborne**. "We can notify players when there's something new to do in the world, we can connect them with their friends and social groups, we can help them share their stories and ours," he explains. "We're pretty proud of what the team accomplished with Bungie.net, but with *Destiny* we're more interested in players' stories than their stats. When someone looks at my profile, I want them to understand where I've been and what I've done."



LEFT Descriptions of The City's hub-like space are reminiscent of *Phantasy Star Online's* shared lobbies. Viewed in thirdperson, they're where players will meet before entering into instanced story missions

"large-scale ambient occlusion" to make *Destiny's* day/night cycle more beautiful. The engine is also built to scale from current consoles to next-gen platforms, such as PS4.

Engineering lead **Chris Butcher** explains the matchmaking tech is made to be invisible, so you won't notice you've entered someone else's game till you see another human. "I've been working on online console games since 2003, when we first brought *Halo* to Xbox Live," he says. "Back then, it was a huge challenge to build things like matchmaking, network party systems and persistent stats, but now every game takes these things for granted. That's the barrier for entry. Now [two players] can link their consoles, join up, fight the Cabal, receive rewards and upgrade their characters as they go. As they approach the Dust Palace on Mars, the host console recognises they're nearing a public combat area, so it reaches out to the server and finds a public game for them. It has to download all the other players' customised gear and weapons, establish network connections and join the game in progress, all invisibly."

Without any perceptible change, players will cross into other people's worlds and find themselves fighting common enemies. Those enemies are as varied as the universe Bungie has created. The Fallen are a race of Mad Maxian pirates, the Vex are time-travelling robots, the Cabal are rhino-sized brutes, while the 'space zombies' are mindless and numerous, and will get a better name soon. The solar system is so busy with outsiders that Bungie has the scope to make every combat encounter different, and there's room in the fiction to justify new species across its ten-year plan for the series.

"If we develop a world where any story is possible, that means the only limit [is] our imagination in the stories that we want to tell," says writer **Joe Staten**. "The setting of each story is the same – Earth, the Moon, Mars – familiar places changed by the passage of time and the imposition of alien forces you don't understand. And the most important stories aren't going to be told by us, but by players in the game – personal legends they build from shared adventures." ●



DESTINY

Staten tells one such story himself. He talks of a mission to Mars to retrieve a classic Bungie MacGuffin, an ancient and powerful AI. Things turned bad, only for him to be saved by the arrival of a player on an airborne bike. Together they ventured deep beneath the Martian surface and found rare weapons – an Invective shotgun, a pistol named Thorn – before parting ways. “Sometimes other players are on the same mission as you, following the same story, but most of the time they’re cutting their own paths through the *Destiny* universe, writing parts of their own legend,” he says. “Every time this happens and I run into another real person, it’s incredible. I play a lot of shooters and this is not like how other shooters operate.”

The comparisons Bungie won’t draw are to *Borderlands*, *Journey* and *Halo*, except to say it plans to surpass the latter’s achievements. But like *Borderlands*, you’ll group up, shoot and loot; like *Journey*, you’ll find your game invaded by outsiders whether you want them or not; like *Halo*, you’ll take part in sandbox

“No matter what we’ve done before, success is never really guaranteed”

shootouts and play a small part in an expansive space opera that will last years.

“If you guys have read our contract with Activision... then you’ll know [it] sets us up for a lot of games for a long time,” says Staten. “But as a storyteller, it’s hugely exciting. It means we can plan for the future, we can build a world that’s rich with history and mystery, [with stories that] won’t be unravelled for years to come.”

The contract calls for four biennial releases, with DLC scheduled for the off years. Bungie considers each game a ‘book’ in the tale, with the campaigns broken down into chapters you can play alongside friends and the strangers trust into your game. Further granularity comes by way of hubs – The City is a thirdperson social space where you can trade or gamble before embarking on raids, or engage in adversarial Faction Wars for rewards to carry back into the campaign.

The UI for all this is The City itself, where players can meet, form parties and board their ships before entering combat. “We have a lot of information to convey,” Jones explains, “and we can do it in a way that is totally invisible. All core experiences must be delivered as simply and directly as possible. People have a lot of options [about] what they spend their time on; we want them to choose our game. *Destiny* must draw in players of all skill levels. Would we spend all that time building this experience for any other reason?”

The sheer scale of this project is overwhelming. A team of 350 work from an old multiplex above a former bowling alley, all to make room for *Destiny*’s team. Bungie’s artists have collectively created more concept art for *Destiny* than all its previous projects combined, “and we’re proud of it,” says art director **Chris Barrett**. Butcher’s team has built new distributive computer clusters just to handle the masses of content involved. *Halo*’s composer, Martin O’Donnell, has produced an 80-minute suite of music with Sir Paul McCartney at Abbey Road, which may not even make it into the game.

But Hirschberg is clear about Activision’s intentions for *Destiny* and for every game the publisher handles from here on. “We’ve made a strategic decision to focus our energies on doing a few games exceptionally well,” he explains. “Every game, we try to make sure there is something that gives it the opportunity to be the best in its breed and become a part of popular culture.”

Destiny marks the start of Activision’s expensive voyage into a new kind of game making. It’s not enough for it to just be a game, it has to be a mobile app, a comic book, a soft drink, a social network, and a hobby in its own right. It has to go beyond videogames and become a cultural phenomenon. Ten years, four games, 350 jobs and \$400 million are at stake, all gambled on an idea bought years before the first copies hit shelves.

“We need to earn the big audience,” says Staten, a veteran of five *Halos*. “No matter what we’ve done before, success is never really guaranteed. If I could pick one lesson that we’ve learned over the years, one thing I think is critical to *Destiny*’s story, it’s this.” ■

Q&A

Pete Parsons

COO, Bungie



Why make *Destiny* a ‘shared world experience’ rather than a full MMOG?

Often you think of MMOGs as hundreds of people in one space, or even a different type of gameplay, but really what we’re making – and what we’re good at – is an FPS. We believe the next evolution is persistent and online; that’s next-generation FPS and that’s what we’re setting up to do. There are things that we have learned – a lot from MMOGs – but for us it’s just the next logical step.

Halo was enjoyed by many players who preferred to play alone. Is there a risk of alienating a portion of your fanbase by forcing everyone online?

These are some big questions that we’ve wrestled with and absolutely solved. How do I have my own strong personal narrative? How do we slope the floor to bringing the guy who only wants to play alone together with other players? How do I get them to say, ‘I came in to a space, I was up against the wall and somebody helped me out’?

I’m by myself and I’m moving through the campaign. I come out to an open area, Fallen dropships are coming in. I see some people and they’re pinned down. The first thing I’m going to do is help them. Those people may go on and finish their mission, or we can join up and have an adventure. Either way, I still had that contact. All of a sudden you’re in a place that’s alive and it’s exciting to be a part of something. It’s exciting, even if I don’t want to play with anyone else, just to be in a world that feels like it’s living. I can’t ever see it getting old.

We’d like you to be able to play so you don’t need a headset... If we can bring people together purely through gameplay without using voice [then] that would be a really exciting thing.

Over ten years huge skill disparities will build up, separating new and old players. Has that played a part in your thinking?

One thing that the designers have been spending a bunch of their time on [is] how do we make sure we can provide incentive for those veterans to be rewarded for bringing noobs in and helping them into the experience? We have a bunch of great ideas around that.

Why partner with Activision?

We found great alignment there. Look at Activision’s position in the marketplace. They like to do big things, they like to take on big challenges and they like big entertainment. So that was really exciting to the entire team, and that’s how we thought about it.



FROM LEFT The Warlock is *Destiny's* magic user, Hunters are its ranger class, and Titans are the heavy soldiers. Each class has stats for Energy, Shields, Agility and Discipline, the latter figure governing a character's mastery over the magic-like powers gifted to humanity by The Traveler. Characters are faceless, defined by their armour and equipment. Every component and weapon can be traded and replaced with discovered loot and crafted gear. There are countless examples of rare loot to be found in *Destiny's* world, but on Bungie's walls hang A3 print-outs of a single gun chassis that's been reworked multiple times with exotic scopes, stocks and barrels, perhaps evidence of a procedural system for creating variant weapons

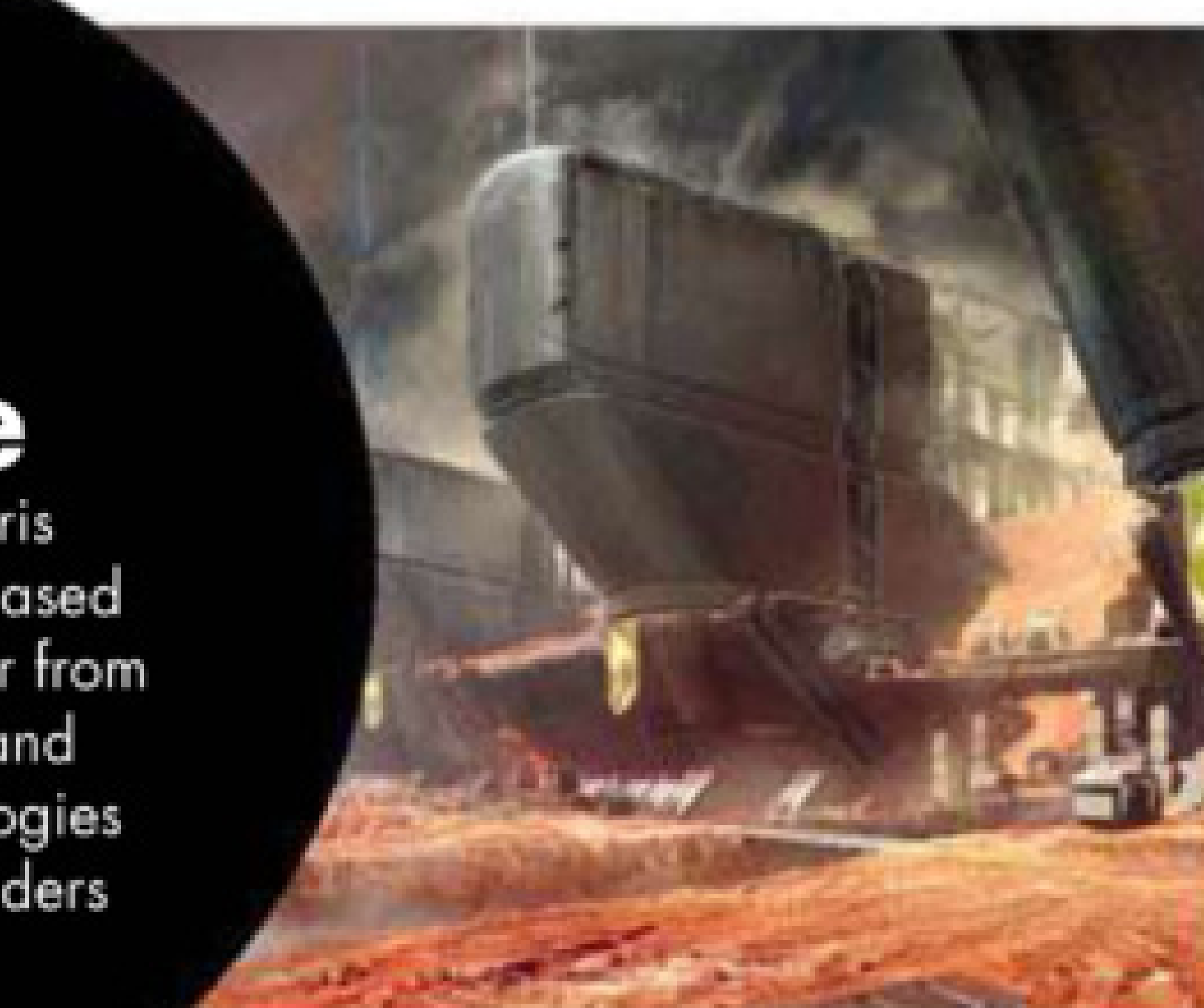
RIGHT This airborne bike, seemingly of Fallen descent, is only one of the vehicles mentioned in Bungie's talk about *Destiny's* art and story. Fallen engineering is agile and lightweight, based on scavenged technology and tarnished metals, and bristling with firepower. On Mars, Cabal forces deploy armoured vehicles befitting their daunting size, including heavy tanks and dropships that few players will be able to take on by themselves. BELOW The Citadel is *Destiny* at its most visually abstract. Home to the Vex – time-travelling robots from the future – it's a mess of gravity-defying geometry reaching far above the clouds. It exists outside the confines imposed by *Halo's* time-honoured aesthetic



Design showcase

Directed by Bungie's Chris Barrett, *Destiny's* art is based around the ruins left over from humanity's golden age and the strange new technologies introduced by alien invaders

ABOVE-RIGHT The Martian exclusion zone is a striking throwback to *Halo's* chunky geometry, all harsh angles under smooth surfaces, with the same shapes being replicated over and over for dramatic effect. RIGHT The Traveler sits low in Earth's orbit, an alien object floating in a familiar sky



H | Y
P | E

REMEMBER ME

Neo-Paris looks unforgettable, but
how about Dontnod's combat?

Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Dontnod Entertainment
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	France
Release	June 4 (US), June 7 (EU)

RIGHT Nilin starts *Remember Me* with amnesia, though thankfully that doesn't appear to have affected her combat skills. As a character, she's perhaps a little too blank a canvas, though she has a whole game to gather herself a proper identity

The last time that a new IP with a highly customisable combat system debuted late in the console cycle, it didn't go all that well. Yes, *God Hand* is fondly remembered to this day, but it launched when press and punters alike were distracted by new hardware. Overlooked as much by critics as by its prospective market, the studio that made it closed its doors soon after. **Jean-Maxime Moris**, co-founder of Paris-based dev Dontnod and *Remember Me*'s creative director, acknowledges the similarities.

"Of course *God Hand* was on the combat designer's desk," he says. "It's one of the most underrated games on the PS2, so let's hope it's not the same for us. I'd rather have good articles when the game comes out than have them five years later, that's for sure!"

Remember Me's target market is, however, quite different from the one at which Clover Studio's swan song brawler was pitched. This is an action-adventure aimed at a broad audience, with fists and feet in place of the genre-standard pistol, rifle and shotgun, and the intimidatingly long move list of your typical melee combat game whittled down to just four combo strings, every single move of which can be defined by you. "Instead of learning 200 combos with 200 different timings, you only have four





Neo-Paris is all about contrast. The grubby lower reaches of Deep Paris butt up against the sunlit buildings up high, and sci-fi skyscrapers are set against recognisable landmarks such as the domes of Sacré Coeur

combos that are like the four weapons you'd be carrying in a regular action-adventure," Moris explains. "But you're going to be able to customise those weapons all the time."

When Nilin, *Remember Me's* mixed-race female protagonist, levels up, she unlocks Pressens, which modify the effect of the moves to which they're assigned. There are four types in all, though during the course of our demo we're only introduced to two: red Power Pressens provide various damage boosts, while yellow Regen ones replenish health. Combat is slow, yet not in a sluggish way; input timings are lenient, but once you press a button you're committed to that move. Unlike other melee-based action games, there's no way of cancelling an attack once it's begun and the enemies hit hard. You've got a dodge, but it has precious little invincibility.

Self-control, it seems, is key; this is to the likes of *God Of War* what burst fire is to spray and pray. "What we're trying to teach the player – and it's not easy, because it's true that many people tend to button mash – is that you can take your time."

He's right: you soon start to make sure an attack connects and that you're safe to follow it up before you commit to a new one. Fighting game players call this approach 'hit

confirming', and it's a key component to advanced play. That, though, is about the only evidence of the love of *Street Fighter* held by several members of the team; there's depth here, but it's strategic, not technical, in nature.

Even at this early stage, we find ourselves torn between adding a Power or Regen Pressen to our most frequently used combo. By the time all four combos and 24 Pressens – plus the S-Pressen special moves introduced late in our demo – are unlocked, players could

Remember Me is to the likes of God Of War what burst fire is to spray and pray

spend as much time in the pause menu tinkering with setups as using them.

Remember Me's world is vividly realised, and Paris is a surprisingly good fit for a cyberpunk overhaul. Like *Binary Domain's* 2080 vision of Tokyo, the Neo-Paris of 2084 is split into three tiers: the poverty-stricken slums at the bottom, the rich up high and the middle class in between. But while Yakuza Studio's shooter could feasibly have been set in any futuristic city on the planet, Dontnod seeks to maintain a consistent sense of place

by surrounding the action with familiar Parisian sights, some more subtly than others. Famous landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower and Sacré Coeur dot the horizon, while old Parisian architecture has been built over with new. The game's first fight is set in the bowels of Nation station, a lamppost Metro sign that once stood at street level the only discernible object in a pile of rubble.

"[Paris] is where we live. We love this city," Moris says. "And if we want to go out to shoot some pictures to get reference material, everything is readily available just across the street." The result is striking to our eyes, but will it play as well overseas? "It's one of the most touristy cities in the world – it's almost like a brand. I think it definitely has appeal, which maybe cannot be said of the French people! Movies like *Ratatouille* and *Inception* have shown that it's not a drawback."

What we see of Neo-Paris and the angle from which we see it are both tightly controlled, especially out of combat, with Nilin clambering from rooftop to rooftop out of sight of the guards below. Camera angles artfully frame the critical path, and there are objective markers to light the way in the few moments where you might be in doubt. The endearingly named Edge, who helps Nilin escape the Orwellian memory-wiping



REMEMBER ME

The Leapers are canny foes, preferring to launch off the walls than attack head on. That means combat is not just about keeping an eye on your immediate surroundings, but an arena's periphery



facility where the game kicks off, is also a constant source of disembodied advice. The game's perhaps a little too keen to hold your hand, then, and Moris admits that's by design.

"Remember Me is a linear experience – I'm not going to stand here and lie to you," he says. "It's a conscious creative choice that we made to keep as much control as possible of events and the emotions that players go through from a narrative perspective. Granted, [open-world games are] something that some quadruple-A [studios] can manage, but not everyone can shift the same team sizes as Rockstar or Ubisoft. It's really a creative choice, reinforced by constraints, but to me it's not a problem, because the main focus of the game is telling Nilin's story."

Such candour is refreshing, and so is the sight of a new IP so late in the console cycle that's set in Paris and has a female hero at its

heart. That said, one man's refreshing is another man's risky, so it's as easy to see why Sony dropped *Remember Me* in 2011, having signed it in 2010, as it is to understand why Capcom picked it up. While we suspect the publisher's flair for action games was a contributing factor, Moris speaks only of the

"Remember Me is a linear experience – I'm not going to stand here and lie to you"

respect Capcom had for Dontnod's vision: that it didn't insist on Nilin being restyled as "a white male with big muscles and titanium armour". And little wonder: the last time Capcom put out a new late-gen IP with a muscular male protagonist and a create-a-combo system, it didn't work out so well. ■

Memory mash-ups

While there will be boss fights to overcome, *Remember Me's* first chapter ends with a Memory Remix, in which you make subtle environmental changes to an antagonist's memory of a specific incident in order alter not the event itself, but their recollection of it. It's smart stuff in theory, but in practice you're simply rewinding and fast-forwarding looking for a visual glitch and a button prompt. We're assured things become more complex later on, though we suspect red herrings will only reinforce the sense of trial and error. The sequences serve a narrative purpose, though, filling in some of the blanks in Nilin's forgotten past.



Q&A Michel Koch

Co-art director,
Dontnod



What is about Paris as a videogame setting that you found so appealing?

Paris hasn't been done that much in videogames, and I think it's never been done in a sci-fi setting. The game is about memories, and Paris is an old city with a lot of history. It was a really good way for us to blend memories of the city with the new futuristic element we added on top of it. We kept a lot of old buildings, old chimneys, Parisian roofs and sculptures, and on top we built our sci-fi. We added new floors over old buildings, and it was a good way to create a contrast.

How faithful to Parisian geography have you been?

Well, we are making a game, and we want it to be fun and interesting to play. At first, we tried to make it very large – like, it took 15 minutes to cross [a level] – but it wasn't fun. So we wanted to keep the essence and the feeling of Paris. We kept the Metro and subway stations, we kept landmarks, but we took some creative licence with the distances – we moved them around a bit. Notre Dame is not exactly where it is in real life, for example. We didn't want it to be realistic. Only the French would recognise that and say, 'That's shitty! That's not exactly right.'

Is Paris always a visual anchor, or are there moments that are full-on sci-fi where you could be anywhere?

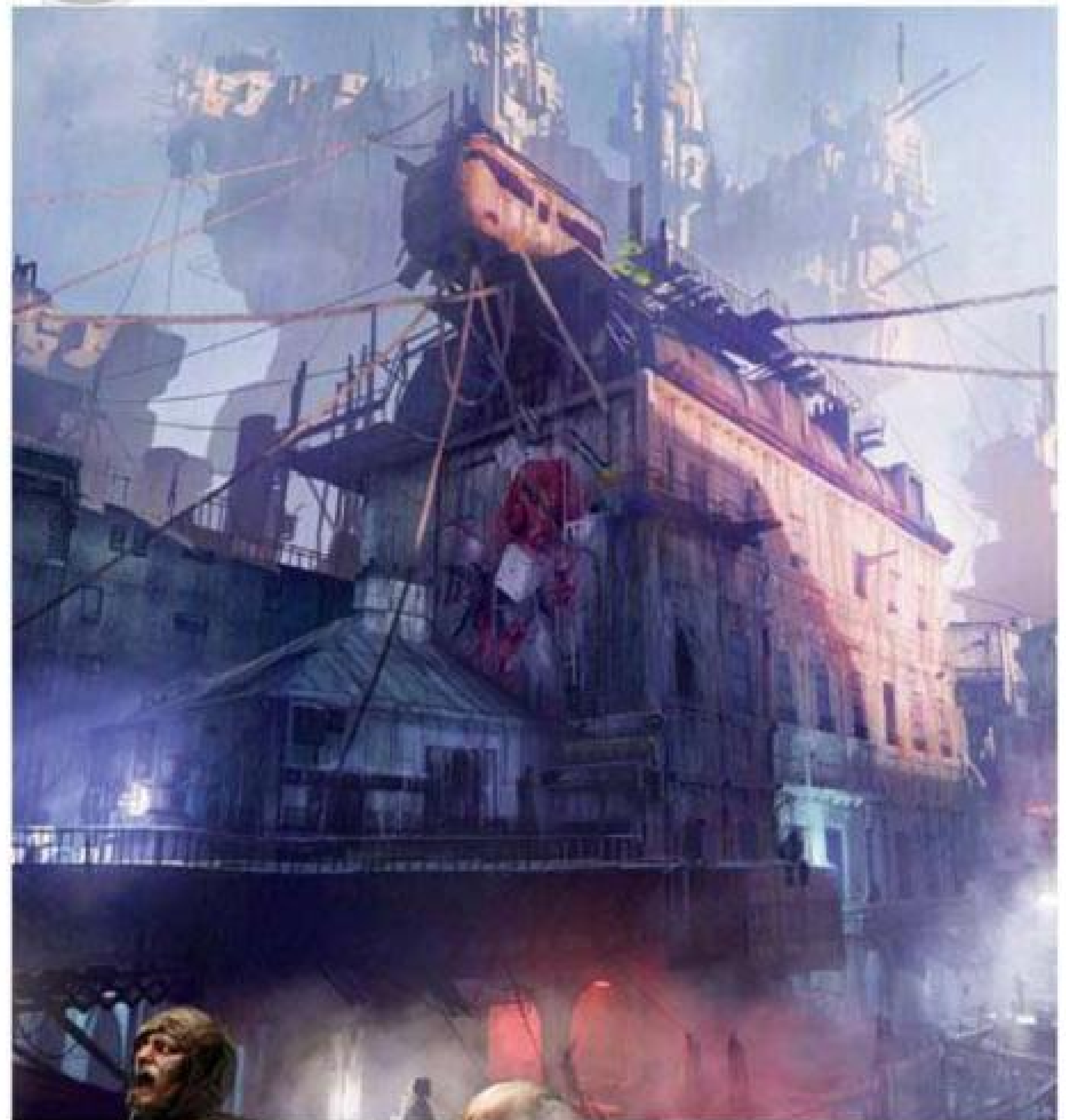
That's something we really tried to get: you are in Paris. Even when you're in some hi-tech building and it looks really futuristic from the windows, you can see Parisian buildings in the distance, so you know you're in Neo-Paris.

Do we get to head outside the city at all, or does everything take place here?

The whole game takes place in Neo-Paris, but we have a lot of variety – every level is different. We might come back to some places we've already visited, but at another time of day, [in] different weather, or other changes depending on the story. We have three different places in Paris: Deep Paris is the slums where the poor are living, just surviving. Mid-Paris more closely resembles the city as it looks today. And you have High Paris, which takes place in those big buildings you see in the background, which is, of course, where the richer population is. And we have other different places, like the subway, some underground facilities and camps. There is really a lot of variety in the game, and we wanted, from both an art and a game perspective, to have the player really travel inside the city and see a lot of different places.



ABOVE Throughout, Dontnod seeks to remind players they're in Paris, though that's hard to achieve in the dense, neon-flecked grime. BELOW That you often don't realise you're clambering around a famous landmark says a lot about the strength of Dontnod's world design. Here's the Arche Saint Denis of the future, having been assimilated by the filth and bustle of the urban sprawl



ABOVE This is a lot of world-building for a single game, so it's not surprising Moris has his eyes set on more. "We definitely built the universe with more games in mind, even stuff outside games. What you've seen is the tip of the iceberg." LEFT Leapers infest the city's lower reaches and are the first foes Nilin faces. They think she's one of them, unaware that she's narrowly avoided having her brain wiped totally clean in the facility she's just escaped

Design showcase

The architecture and characters that underpin Dontnod's vision of Paris in 2084

LEFT Olga is introduced as a foe, holding a knife tight to Nilin's throat in search of revenge. Nilin can change people's memories, though, and Olga's soon an ally. RIGHT These hulking, hard-hitting fellows can only be damaged with certain moves. With only four combos, it's up to enemies to ensure we mix up attacks



The graphic, transformative death caused by the game's cordyceps fungus, which has levelled human civilisation, forms a rich, vile backdrop for all of *The Last Of Us*'s character-driven interactions

H | Y
P | E

THE LAST OF US

Naughty Dog reveals the frantic art of survival in its post-pandemic world

Publisher	Sony
Developer	Naughty Dog
Format	PS3
Origin	US
Release	June 14



ABOVE Standing and fighting a group of infected of this size is nearly impossible, even using a gun. This tussle will either end in death or you beating a quick retreat

Seconds into our first hands-on demo of *The Last Of Us* – just as the lean, player-controlled smuggler Joel is about to enter a toppled office block on a desolate, overgrown city street – a pack of rats scurries around a corner of damaged concrete. The rodents offer a bleak parallel to the exotic birds that memorably flutter through the jungles of Naughty Dog’s *Uncharted* and highlight the differences between the studio’s two projects. They may share tech and a surface style, but *The Last Of Us* is a dark, feral story of survival, and a stark contrast to *Uncharted*’s bright sightseeing.

Naughty Dog’s public focus on *The Last Of Us* thus far has been about emotion, performance, and characters having to react to the pressures of a post-pandemic world. There’s an inevitable grounding bump to finally testing out the systems tasked with matching these ideas and translating their tension into gameplay. But judging from the short segment we play, *The Last Of Us* is an effectively fraught and frightening game.

The approach seems to be to take what Naughty Dog knows – the thirdperson shooting, melee combat and acrobatics of *Uncharted* – and then strip it bare. *Uncharted*’s abundant ammo pickups are absent, for instance, replaced by a crafting system that

forces you to scavenge for useful items – blades, rags and bottles – before deciding how to use them. Combine enough rags and blades and you get a shiv, but use the rags with alcohol instead and you have a bandage.

These choices are significant in the context of *The Last Of Us*’s brutal, unforgiving combat. Joel’s familiar over-the-shoulder aiming is misleading: he’s not able to gun down the game’s frenzied, infected enemies in great numbers, not least because he rarely has a full clip to use. His ammo is precious,

The infected are slowly blinded by exquisitely gruesome fungal growths

aiming is heavier than in *Uncharted*, and even headshots won’t necessarily kill an infected first time. Besides, the infected, who are being slowly blinded by the exquisitely gruesome fungal growths taking over their bodies, are creatures of sound and use echolocation, so any noise brings them to you shrieking.

Combine this with what the game’s director, **Bruce Straley**, describes as its “high lethality” – Joel is vulnerable and dying is easy – and the result is that each encounter becomes tense, hushed, and has to be





THE LAST OF US

Given the fine line between survival and death, your AI partners' intervention can be vital. Fellow smuggler Tess played backup during our hands-on, and made a decisive contribution



negotiated with minimal resources. Suddenly, the decision of whether to make a shiv, which can effect three quick, silent kills from behind before it's expended, or a bandage, which can be applied mid-fight, is a crucial part of planning how to survive a dangerous ordeal.

It plays unlike anything else, involving a form of stealth – Joel has a 'listen mode' in which he crouches lower to the ground and is able to detect the location of enemies through walls. But success often rests on breaking cover loudly to seize opportunities before running away, or diverting attention away from you with a thrown brick or bottle. The sound and weight of any blows struck and guns fired only adds to the tension; there's a resounding sense of mortality to everything, and you feel relieved rather than victorious when your last enemy has been shot or bludgeoned to the ground.

How this spontaneous combat works across many hours in different settings and against human enemies will determine the popularity of *The Last Of Us*. There are, however, some surprisingly familiar generic touches in among all the unconventional fighting. A fallen security soldier discovered by Joel and Ellie as they move through the tilted building holds a note containing his final thoughts – mostly to do with when his backup will arrive – and our first contact with the infected takes the form of a jarring, corner-turning jump scare.

For all that *The Last Of Us* is being marketed as something new and untried ('survival action', not survival horror, is the careful label applied), it's not completely divorced from the likes of *Silent Hill* and *Resident Evil*. In a world full of the prospect of instant death at the hands of homicidal fungal foes, that's oddly comforting. ■



Fight the infection

The variety of the combat in *The Last Of Us* is partly down to the different types of enemy, which are linked to stages of the cordyceps infection. As the infection takes hold, the host's behaviour shifts, giving the game its three basic enemy types. Stage one infected are Runners, who are still visibly human and can close down space and attack very quickly. By stage two, the fungus has erupted from the brain and through the eye sockets, which is imaginatively unpleasant. Stage three results in the Clicker class, whereby the victim has become a jerking, faceless husk that uses echoing throat noises to find its prey.

Q&A Bruce Straley

Game director,
Naughty Dog



How hard has it been to design gameplay to support the character-driven story you're creating?

That's something we've invested ourselves in, trying to build up characters, but also have great gameplay and great systems. I think over the course of the *Uncharted* series we really started to understand and perfect that idea – of how conflict propels story, but at the same time conflict is what makes interesting gameplay – by having an interesting set of tools but having an obstacle in front of you that you as the player have to overcome. You start marrying, like, how do we get those character moments to show up in the gameplay, and how do we get the gameplay to propel character moments? That's the challenge, and it's caused a world of hurt and pain and struggle and anguish. Yet if you just push it, and both ends try to meet in the middle to find that beautiful symbiotic relationship between gameplay and story, you find something new and inventive that gets the player truly invested in the overall experience.

How did you set about creating the improvised quality of combat?

What we wanted as players was to have a wealth of opportunities based on what you can scavenge, what the world affords you: 'Oh, I see a two-by-four; if I combine these scissors with this two-by-four it will change the way I can strategise.' There's an investment in crafting them and choosing, [because] there's overlaps between how these things craft together. Do I want to choose offensive, defensive, [or] stealth? You have a lot of angles you can take just within the crafting system. And it's really up to you about how you want to manage your resources.

The fighting seems to be stealthy, punctuated by bursts of frantic action.

The overall theme for our AI is we want to be able to dip in and out – from combat into stealth and back into combat. We want that flow where, if I can get that sense that something's on me, it's a valid tactic to run. I mean, at some point when it comes to survival, running is your best option. People will lose track of where you went, and then they can go searching for you – and that affords the player the opportunity to say, 'Now I'm going to try something different. Oh, where I'm hiding it turns out there's a brick. How can I use this brick?' We're trying to make some systems that give the player a lot of opportunity to suss out 'What's in front of me? What's in my inventory? What can I do?' And each time they play it, it's going to be a different outcome.

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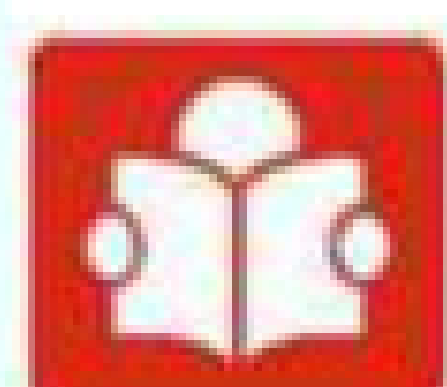


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H | Y
P | E

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG

Pirates! In an adventure
with Assassins

Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	In-house (Montreal as lead studio)
Format	360, PC, PS3, next-gen consoles TBC
Origin	Canada
Release	Q4 2013



www.bit.ly/WfKj97
Screenshot gallery

RIGHT We're not sure that *Black Flag* needs to be an *Assassin's Creed* game, though it probably wouldn't exist if it wasn't. Edward Kenway certainly fights like an Assassin, not a pirate, meaning that melee battles will focus on takedowns and counters against larger groups of enemies

You'll have to forgive us, but we're getting déjà vu. A year ago, we were presented with a new *Assassin's Creed*, one that moved the series to the New World, changed its systems and promised wholesale franchise reinvention. And now here we are being presented with a newer *Assassin's Creed*, a game that moves the series to an even newer New World, changes its systems and promises wholesale franchise reinvention. We've made a note to keep our schedule free this time next year, but in the meantime we can't help — despite our cynicism — being intrigued by the promises made by the fourth numbered game in the series, subtitled *Black Flag*.

Assassin's Creed III's naval sections, fantastic as they were at conveying wave-tossed, wind-lashed atmosphere alongside accessible navigation and combat mechanics, seemed a curious addition to a series with its origins in stealth, subtlety and intrigue. Connor the naval captain and Connor the Assassin didn't quite gel. One was a seditious rebel who skulked behind enemy lines, sliding hidden blades into historical figures' rib cages; the other was a brazen commander, bellowing orders over the thunder of cannon fire.

Edward Kenway, Connor's grandfather, seems an altogether more unified personality. He's a selfish, dashing rogue with Assassin





Tough opponent ships will block your progress through *Black Flag*, meaning its core loop looks to be one of exploring, fighting, looting and upgrading the Jackdaw's offensive and defensive powers in order to advance

training who favours twin cutlasses over hidden knives and is more interested in enriching himself as a result of his maritime scrapes than he is in helping to achieve the political self-determination of an oppressed colonial class. He's a pirate, in other words, captain of the Jackdaw and *Black Flag*'s star.

Of course, does Edward even matter when he's destined to spend so much time behind a ship's wheel? When the *Assassin's* series first appeared, it offered the freeing fantasy of unrestricted movement through urban spaces, but it's freedom of a different sort that *Black Flag* wishes to provide. Ubisoft Montreal has taken the traditional *Assassin's Creed* world map and splintered it, offering players a fictionalised West Indian archipelago to explore. Traditional cities such as Nassau and Kingston will feature, as will fishing villages,

slave plantations and tropical paradises untouched by man. None of these places will be focus of the *Black Flag*, however – that would be the ocean waves.

Assassin Creed III's naval combat was weighty and spectacular, but it wasn't enough to sustain a full adventure, as game director **Ashraf Ismail** admits. "Naval combat was in *ACIII*, it was something we started there, but what was shown was a tease," he says. "We've really put a lot more depth and a lot more gameplay into this system. One of the areas we push it is the new enemies."

So a typical naval encounter might see the player spot – with the aid of Edward's spyglass – a ship in the distance, its hull filled with loot ripe for the plunder. You'll also notice it's a charger, a ship type that, in

Ismail's words, "lines up a path towards your ship, builds up speed and rams you as hard as [it] can." Having assessed the situation, you're able to figure out a counterstrategy. Last year's game had different ammo types and other, changeable ship upgrades, but we suspect outfitting the Jackdaw for the task at hand will be more important still in *Black Flag*. And unlike *Assassin Creed III*, if you cripple an opponent and wish to board their ship, you won't have to face an obvious transition.

"This is one world, and it'll be seamless and fluid," promises creative director **Jean Guesdon**. "So the ability to go from ship to land, from ship to ship and from land to ship will be one fluid loop. We really want to make one naval open-world game. We don't want to make one game on the ground and one on the sea."

There's a lot more to *Black Flag*, however: diving to the bottom of the sea to scavenge from the ocean floor, plenty of traditional *Assassin's Creed* combat and stealth sections, and the exploration of crumbling Mayan ruins. And, of course, there's a brand new present-day frame narrative, too. But nothing thrills quite so much as *ACIV*'s central promise, a design idea that harkens all the way back to *Elite*: Ubisoft is going to give you a ship and a world to explore. ■



Washed clean

If you've finished *ACIII*, you'll know Desmond's tale is over, making this the perfect time to abandon the present-day narrative. It's still here, though, albeit in a seemingly less intrusive form. Rather than playing an extra character through whom you control Edward, you now play a tester in Abstergo Industries' entertainment division, presumably using a full-immersion gaming device that makes the Oculus Rift look like a Virtual Boy. It's a setup that could allow for experimentation with the Animus' nature as a simulation, though Ubisoft is currently reticent to discuss how the narratives will intersect.

H | Y
P | E

COMMAND & CONQUER

War never changes, unless you
download more content for it

Publisher	EA
Developer	Victory Games
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	2013



Each general's powers will mean they offer a distinct playstyle, even next to others in the same faction. Whether this individuality will extend to, say, base stats isn't yet clear

ABOVE While battles are usually decided by armies' compositions and sheer size, General Abilities can genuinely bring outcomes into doubt, offering hope when all seems despair. RIGHT Seeing your base spring to life is a well-animated pleasure. Buildings seem to self-assemble due to their unfolding, articulated joins and whirring insides, but technically the work is done by special units



George Orwell's 1984 contained within it the disturbing spectre of three nation states locked in perpetual, pointless conflict. This bleak state of affairs wasn't motivated by political conviction or desperate need, but a desire to keep the masses' passions directed and engaged. There was no end to hostilities in sight, nor the political desire to achieve it. And, in the nicest possible of ways, this rather reminds us of *Command & Conquer*.

This is EA's forever war, an all-out repurposing of the game that would have become *Command & Conquer: Generals 2*, but has now been transformed into the foundation for a new free-to-play incarnation of the series. Don't let the absence of far-future technology or weaponised dolphins in the surrounding screenshots fool you: while at launch *Command & Conquer* will effectively be *Generals 2*, this is a flexible base for expansion. The spurs of the *Red Alert* series and the sci-fi chain that followed 1999's *Tiberian Sun* are all but guaranteed to follow some way down the line as expansions. Still, there are aspects to *Generals* that make it uniquely suited to relaunching the series.

"*Generals 2* was one of the most popular requests from the community," explains senior development director **Tim Morten**, "and it's been a long time since *Command & Conquer* went back to that universe."

For the uninitiated, *Generals* was 2003's near-future C&C, which seemed designed to offset the increasingly far-future tech of the *Tiberium* series and the camp tomfoolery of *Red Alert*. As well as a distinct approach to resource scavenging, *Generals* offered General Abilities. These limited-use skills, such as carpet bombing runs, could be activated to turn the tide of battle at crucial points, much

like realtime versions of *Advance Wars*' CO Powers. They return in *Command & Conquer* as part of a focus on the individual general you're playing as. Victory Games' reboot has three main factions (see 'Superpowers'), but your choice of general will effectively allow you to play a sub-faction within the three.

Playable generals represent one way in which Victory has solved the problem of making a free-to-play RTS game. Letting players purchase units or resources mid-battle would be a disaster, turning tightly fought skirmishes into little more than Top Trumps played with participants' bank balances. But having a new general doesn't in itself represent an advantage.

Generals unlock through play, but if you're tired of grinding then you can pay to skip the

"Pretty much all structures are destructible. The question is what can destroy them"

wait. There's still potential here for backlash, especially if Victory lets an overpowered general slip out of the academy, but such an error would be catastrophic for the game's balance even if no payment was attached. Furthermore, use of DICE's Frostbite 2 engine has given Victory access to some sophisticated networking technology that's perfectly capable of ensuring players with a great deal of content unlocked are matched against one another rather than rookies.

Generals won't be the only paid-for content, we're sure, but they are key part of the strategy. "We feel like the concept of having specific generals is really compelling,"

Morten says, "and we're planning to carry that into other franchises as we start to revisit them." While this does mean that previously self-enclosed *Command & Conquer* franchises are starting to cross-pollinate one another with what were once discrete mechanics, a *Red Alert* General Ability is certainly something we'd like to see.

Beneath its free-to-play plating, *Command & Conquer* is very much, well, *Command & Conquer*. We play a 40-minute mirror match as the EU against the game's AI, and after carefully establishing our defences and pushing outwards, we find the not-quite-honed AI has spread itself thinly across the entirety of the map during the same time frame. When we finally discover the bulk of its forces, we're able to use a fog-of-war-piercing General Ability to foresee what our tightly knit formation of tanks is rolling into.

Frostbite's networking capabilities might be a rather quiet improvement to the series; the engine's more noticeable effect is seen in *Command & Conquer*'s meticulously detailed and fully destructible environments. From the whirring innards of a self-assembling power generator to the crumpling form of a wooden picket fence beneath our treads, this is an intricate and responsive world, the destruction of which has tactical implications. However, just as DICE has adjusted the exact level of destructibility on offer throughout its games to preserve the intended experience, Victory has worked out its own way to avoid total annihilation happening too quickly.

"Pretty much all structures on the map are destructible," Morten tells us. "The question is what can destroy them. Tanks can roll through fences, infantry units cannot. Likewise with some larger structures, the balance ends up being what units and what firepower can destroy them." The result is a game where cover is at best a temporary refuge, and where the right units can carve their own path to victory.

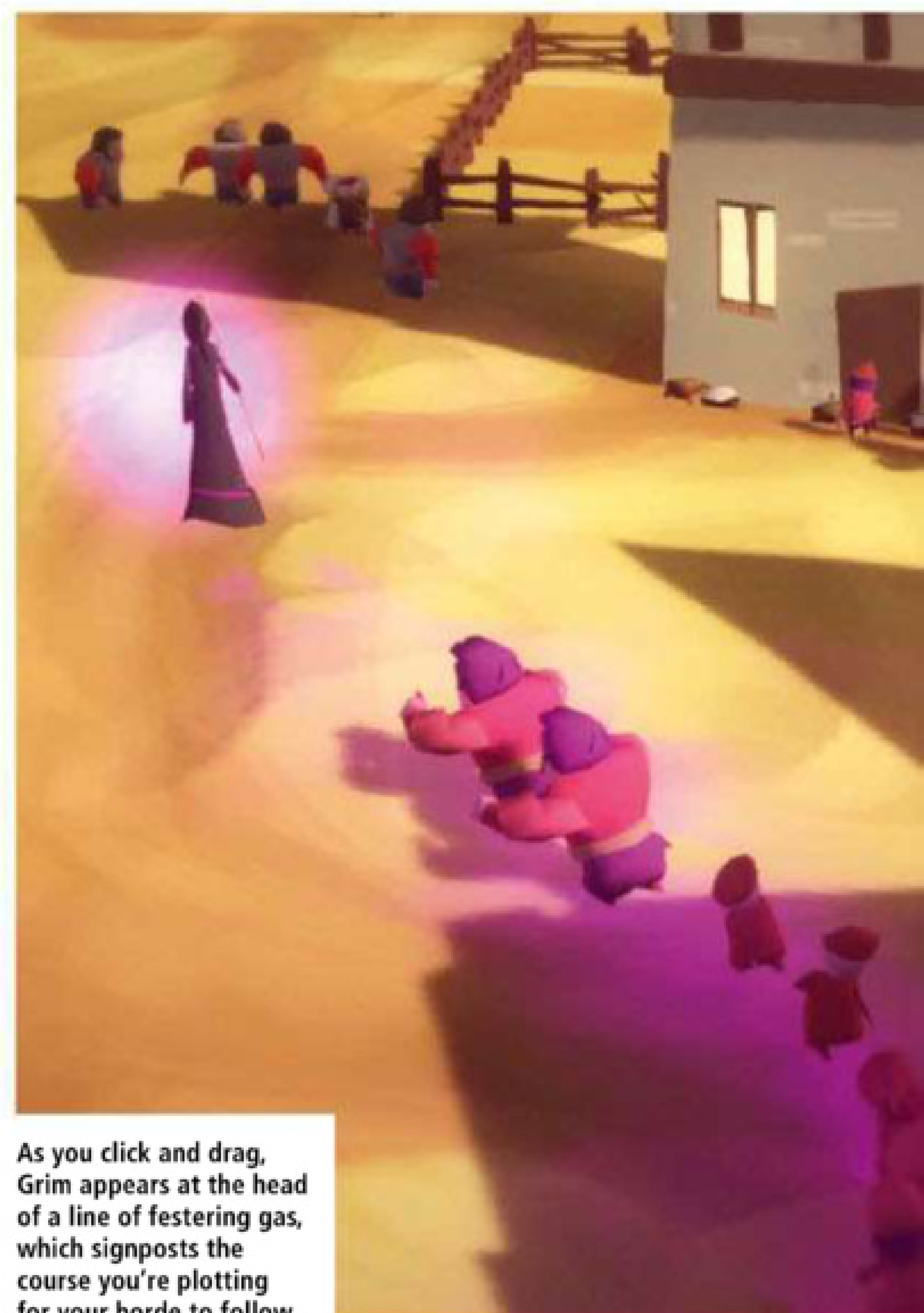
Complex, tactically rich and seemingly uncompromised by the transition to a free-to-play model, *Command & Conquer* is a lot more than a half-hearted attempt to wring money from casual strategists. It's been built to last, but it's also been built to function as the future of the series. ■



Superpowers

Command & Conquer's three starting factions are the Asia Pacific Alliance, the European Union and the Global Liberation Army. Whereas the former is about scale and building up forces, the EU offers a more rounded, unit-focused approach to combat, and has been designed to be the most accessible faction. Its members also look impossibly well-equipped considering the currently cash-strapped nature of most of the member states. Most intriguing of all is the GLA, whose guerrilla nature is reflected in a base building approach that doesn't rely on a central power source and the ability to use tunnels to travel around the map.

RIGHT *Death Inc's* toy soldier-esque look is emphasised by a depth of field effect, which helps to miniaturise scenes such as this harbour town



As you click and drag, Grim appears at the head of a line of festering gas, which signposts the course you're plotting for your horde to follow

H Y
P E

DEATH INC

A new studio faces plague, pestilence and Kickstarter

Publisher	Ambient Studios
Developer	In-house
Format	PC
Origin	UK
Release	October



As we write this, we don't know whether *Death Inc* will make its Kickstarter target, but its time will be up before you read these words. What seems unlikely, though, is that it will make the full £300,000 that developer Ambient Studios wants. What if the Kickstarter fails? "That would be difficult. The clock would be ticking, very much," says co-founder **Jonny Hopper**. Comprising 11 ex-Media Molecule, Lionhead and EA staffers, the Guildford-based studio is already bruised, having faced in December the dissolution of a contract with Sony to make a Vita game, which it worked on during its first year in business. *Death Inc*, hurriedly conceived and prototyped shortly after the new year, represents a lifeline.

Not that the game, despite a theme of pestilence and mortality, betrays the pressure. An RTS with shades of *Dungeon Keeper*, *Pikmin* and *Left 4 Dead*, you play as Grim T Livingstone, a freelance reaper who intends to unleash a plague on 17th century England. Infect the levels' villagers and soldiers with your contagion and they'll fall under your control, ready to be directed by broad sweeps of your mouse to infect more. *Death Inc* is hardly about *StarCraft*-style microcontrol, but it has its tricks. Draw a looped path and your infectees will patrol it until sent elsewhere; hold the mouse button and all nearby infected gather. A simple selection system also allows you to direct specific types of plague carrier – just your ranged archers, say, or villagers.

Complexity comes via using these different unit types effectively. You can soften up fighters, tough melee units able to mow their way through weak infected villagers, with arrows from archers. But be careful not to kill them, or you won't have a chance to infect and gain control of them. The team is keen for there to be synergies between different units, similar to the pairing of a Medic and Heavy in *Team Fortress 2*. Some will have different abilities depending on whether they're infected, such as the Plague



The 17th-century setting provides a wide range of architectural styles, from timber-framed houses to stone castles, as well as brick, thatch and tiles

Doctor, which could (many such details are far from being locked down) cure the infected, or handily bring corpses back to life. The Town Crier could raise the alarm, causing the uninfected to flee, but when infected may cause your horde to rally quicker. Add to the mix plague rats, exploding livestock and carrier pigeons dropping contaminated guano,

Given it's been in production for eight weeks, Death Inc is a remarkably mature project

and you have a range of Monty Python And The Holy Grail-inflected strategies at hand.

Adding still more is the fact that the horde is physics-based, lending a puzzle element to the level design as well as a sense of emergent possibility. "I love the idea of them behaving a little like a fluid simulation," says designer **Daniel Leaver**. "There's a certain magic to having things physics-based – it's probably

a programmer's worst nightmare not to have everything constrained nicely, but it's really funny when things go wrong. That's something we learned from *LittleBigPlanet*: if you have physics involved, it's funny."

You'll encounter gates that you can open by having your units push the spokes of a rotating wheel, and catapults that you'll need to wind up in a similar manner before you use them to throw your units over the walls of castles to infect them from within. Consider, too, using force of numbers to bust open doors and dam rivers so you can cross.

The overall aim of the game is to grow your reaping empire from your base in the cellar of your nan's cottage. As you hire underlings with the souls you've earned from the levels, you can populate rooms – granting upgrades to your hordes and new abilities, such as plague rats. In effect, the cellar is a tech tree, but drawn with the same offbeat humour as the main game.

Given that it's only been in production for eight weeks, *Death Inc* is a remarkably mature project – already functional and boasting realtime visuals that are almost indistinguishable from its concept art. It'd be a huge shame for the vagaries of Kickstarter to endanger its projected completion in October. But such are the challenges that lie ahead for many new studios, staffed by experienced developers who've traded the comparative security of the traditional industry for creative freedom. ■



Killer look

Death Inc's visual style is striking, drawn with more than a nod to the jarring angles of backgrounds in classic Warner Bros cartoons. This gives levity to a potentially dark theme, aided by the cheery bouncing gait of the infected. The 17th century setting came partly from wanting to make a zombie game without zombies, and partly from inspiration. "We have lots in the UK: buildings, colours, light that's refreshing," says art director **Tim Holleyman**, "Cornish seascapes, Welsh landscapes – not something you see often, but rich in terms of colour and light." He's planning levels set at dawn and sunset to exploit these possibilities to the full.



ROUND-UP

TALES OF XILLIA

Publisher Namco Bandai | Developer In-house (Tales Studio) | Format PS3 | Origin Japan | Release 2013



The *Tales* series has traditionally handled the camera work, but Namco has wisely decided to hand control over to players in *Tales Of Xillia*, and with good reason. This is the most beautiful *Tales* game yet, and one we'd love to appreciate from every angle. In the early section of the game we saw, a med student named Jude tries to sneak into a university to track down a professor, with the game's lush blues and greens broken up by glowing lights and glistening ripples in the water surrounding the institution. It's still without a release date 18 months after its Japanese launch, but the smart money's on a summer launch.

THE 90'S ARCADE RACER

Publisher Nicalis | Developer Antonis Pelekanos
Format PC, Mac, Wii U | Origin Greece | Release December



It may be further proof that Kickstarter is doing to game names what SEO did to the headline, but *The 90's Arcade Racer* is an appealing concept. It passed its slender \$10,000 target with ease, and caught the eye of indie publisher Nicalis. Lone developer Antonis Pelekanos cites *Scud Race*, *Daytona USA* and *Indy 500* as his touchstones, and judging by early screens and video, one of the biggest sources of inspiration is the bright blue skies of Sega's heyday.

WILDSTAR

Publisher NCsoft | Developer Carbine Studios
Format PC | Origin US | Release TBC



Carbine Studios says it is making the next great MMOG, and if the Pixar-does-sci-fi setup doesn't appeal, perhaps the combat will. Players and enemies are surrounded by coloured shapes that denote the range of their attacks, and battles are dynamic, with players dancing in and out of striking range.

THE VANISHING OF ETHAN CARTER

Publisher The Astronauts | Developer In-house
Format PC | Origin Poland | Release 2013



The Astronauts is a new studio created by ex-senior People Can Fly staff. Its debut is this "weird fiction horror" about a supernatural detective investigating the kidnapping of a young boy. Details are scant, but the story is the focus, with co-founder Adrian Chmielarz citing *Journey* and *Dear Esther*.

DAYLIGHT

Publisher Zombie Studios | Developer In-house
Format PC | Origin US | Release 2013



Zombie Studios' procedurally generated survival-horror is powered by Unreal Engine 4. Studio head Jared Gerritzen is full of praise for Epic's new tech, specifically its Blueprints and dynamic lighting. Those who think next-gen means bigger budgets take note: *Daylight's* being made by a team of six.

THE CASTLE DOCTRINE

Publisher Jason Rohrer | **Developer** In-house
Format PC, Mac, Linux | **Origin** US | **Release** 2013



Few creators would follow up a diamond-trading game with a massively multiplayer burglary sim, but that's Jason Rohrer for you. You don't have to go robbing, but it's the only way you're going to find materials to improve your home security, and you might return to find you've had a break-in as well.

AMNESIA: A MACHINE FOR PIGS

Publisher Frictional Games | **Developer** Thechineseroom
Format PC | **Origin** UK | **Release** Q2 2013



Thechineseroom has handed final code over to Frictional, the studio behind 2011's *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*. What was intended to be a short horror game has so expanded in scope that by the time Frictional has given it a final polish it will have missed its planned Halloween release by six months.

NEW GAME PLUS

Publisher Superflat Games | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** UK | **Release** TBC



Jasper Byrne is an insatiable fan of FromSoftware's *Souls* games and is working on a 2D homage to the dark-fantasy RPG series. We've played a bit of the multiplayer and are pleased to report that it's quite possible to do an evasive roll and go tumbling like an idiot over the edge of a cliff.

INJUSTICE: GODS AMONG US

Publisher Warner Bros | **Developer** NetherRealm Studios
Format 360, PS3, Wii U | **Origin** US | **Release** April



This is no mere reskin of NetherRealm's middling *Mortal Kombat* reboot, although the two do share an engine and, at a fundamental level, a combat system, with canned combos and basic juggles building up your meter for Super moves. *Injustice* is, however, charmingly slapstick – Joker's arsenal includes custard pies, Batman runs people over with the Batmobile – and as such even harder to take seriously than *Mortal Kombat* was.

RAYMAN LEGENDS

Publisher Ubisoft | **Developer** In-house (Montpellier) | **Format** 360, PS3, Wii U | **Origin** France | **Release** September



Last-minute delays are becoming a habit for Wii U. Hot on the heels of Nintendo Europe's 11th-hour cane round the neck of *Scribblenauts Unlimited* came news of a six-month wait for the now multiplatform *Rayman Legends*. Fans are furious, and so are the devs – series creator Michel Ancel included. They have every right to be, with Ubisoft admitting that development of the Wii U version is already finished. It's a sound business decision perhaps, but that will be of little comfort to Wii U owners. September's also a curious choice, with *Legends* now given the impossible task of taking on *Grand Theft Auto V*.



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EMBRACE CREATIVITY. EMBRACE LIFE.

Whoever you are and whatever you do, express your passion with the on-the-go creativity of the Samsung GALAXY Note II

Mobile has moved on. Smartphones aren't just about apps, the Internet and multimedia; today's big-screen, high-power superphones are tools where your ideas are captured, your life is planned and your creativity can be realised. Samsung's multifaceted GALAXY Note II, with its S Pen tech and Multi Window versatility, embodies this concept and its story is told here by four forward-thinking creative professionals.



1/ MARCUS JAYE THE BLOGGER



Marcus Jaye runs independent men's style blog The Chic Geek (www.thechicgeek.co.uk). Capturing the moment is a key element to his business, and sharing it with his readers quickly is essential.

Hitting the streets with the GALAXY Note II, Jaye spots a couple of well-dressed men and gets their permission to take photos for his blog. Using the Best Photo feature, he reels off a volley of shots, then picks the best poses and expressions. Next, he employs Paper Artist to turn his selection into a hand-drawn work of digital art. "For me, creativity is about taking risks, breaking rules, making mistakes and having fun," he says. Later, other trend-setting gents are captured with the slow motion movie mode and 1080p video capture, with multiple files saved to the GALAXY Note II's sizeable, 64GB internal memory.

For bloggers such as Jaye, this ability to create content anywhere is indispensable. "It helps me to unleash my creativity," he

<http://www.gizmodo.co.uk/your-mobile-life>

explains. "The camera is great and editing photos is very easy."

Performing multiple tasks on the same screen at the same time with no screen transitions, Jaye is able to update his website, look through his photos and create a digital scrapbook for his latest post. "Above all, creativity is about inventing," he concludes.

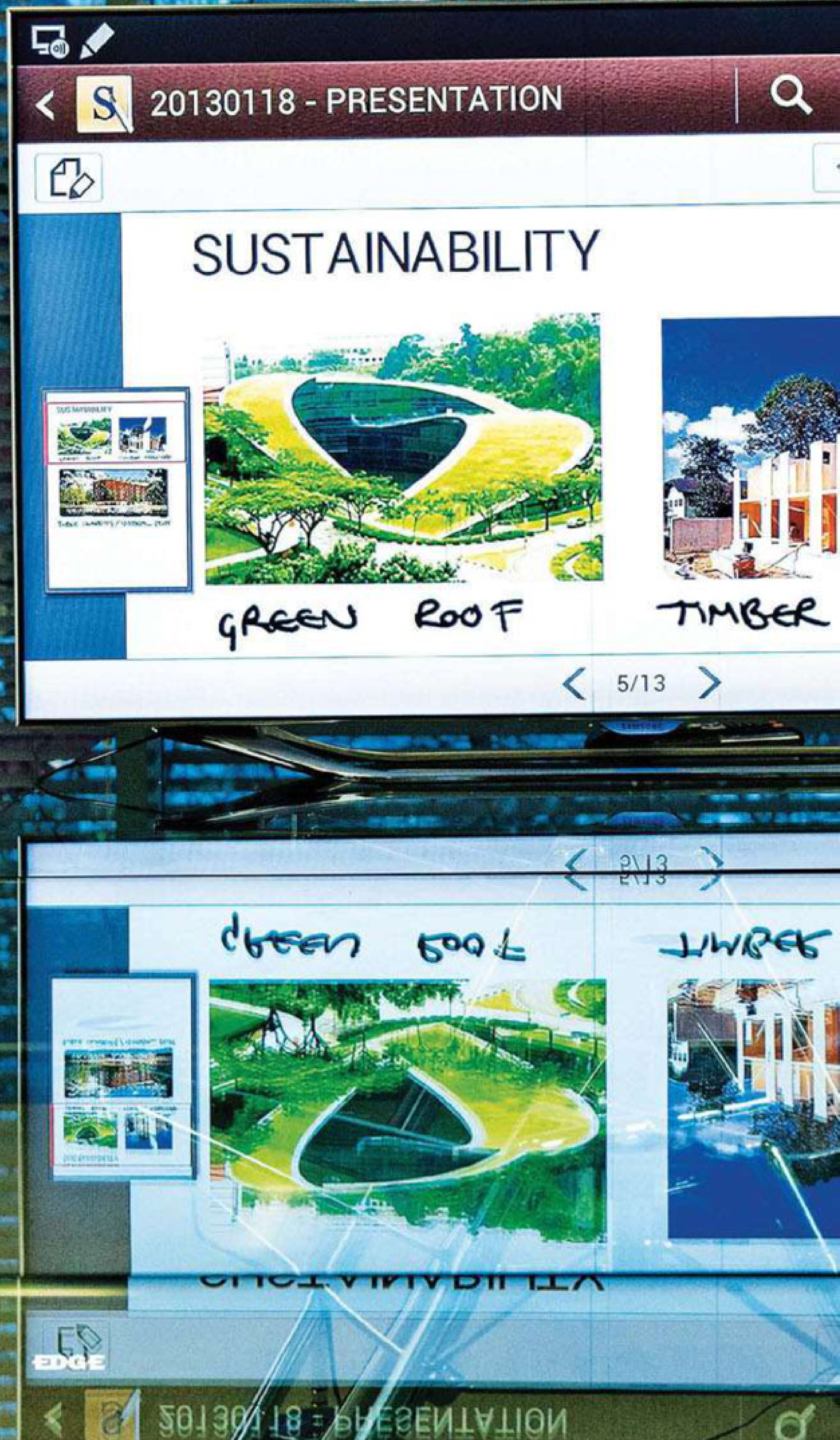


KILLER FEATURE "Easy Clip lets me cut models out for manipulation in other apps, such as Paper Artist. The result is content that looks great on the website"

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ADDICTIVE. I CAN'T IMAGINE
NOT HAVING SOMETHING LIKE
THAT ON MY PHONE NOW"
MARCUS JAYE, BLOGGER

"THIS PHONE WAS
REALLY EASY TO
USE. IT'S GOT A
BEAUTIFUL SCREEN
AND IS POWERFUL
ENOUGH TO DO ALL
THE THINGS I WANT
TO DO AT THE SAME
TIME AND WITHOUT
COMPROMISE"
TONI FRYER,



2/ TONI FRYER THE ARCHITECT

Toni Fryer is an architect at Juice Architects. Her studio is her workplace, but the outside world is her inspiration.

"I love my job, as it gives me the freedom to explore my creativity on a daily basis," Fryer says as she uses the GALAXY Note II's panorama mode to seamlessly stitch together a super-widescreen city landscape via the eight-megapixel, auto-focus rear camera. "Sometimes you have to leave your normal working environment to find that idea you've been searching for."

Using the S Pen and Photo Note feature, Fryer can attach written memos to each photo, adding information such as the date and location as well as her emotional responses. Capturing a foliage texture in a park, she explains: "As an architect, my creativity thrives on introducing nature into the built environment to create beautiful and sustainable places."

Back in the studio, Air View allows all her captured photos to be browsed and viewed on the phone's vibrant, 5.5-inch HD Super AMOLED screen without the need to open any folders, instantly transporting Fryer back to her place of inspiration. "I found the Air View feature really handy," she says. "It saved me loads of time and made organising my many photos effortless."

Using the Easy Clip feature, Fryer crops and keeps pertinent visuals from each photo, creating a digital scrapbook that can then be emailed to her team or to external contractors.



Changing the S Pen settings and switching to Idea Sketch, she is able to visualise her ideas to develop the concept.

Summing up, Fryer says: "In my line of work, you need to be able to capture creative inspiration the moment you find it. I was amazed to find out that the GALAXY Note II recognises more than 1,000 levels of pressure sensitivity, meaning sketching and illustrating were smooth, responsive and, above all, accurate."



KILLER FEATURE

"Air View lets me browse through all my photos at speed, allowing thoughts and inspirations to be edited quickly"

<http://www.gizmodo.co.uk/your-mobile-life>

PROMOTION

3/ RAHUL AHUJA THE ENTREPRENEUR

Tech start-up innovator **Rahul Ahuja** runs www.taskhub.co.uk. His site is designed to outsource your to-do list, helping you make time for the things in your life that you really enjoy doing. Fittingly, then, Ahuja helps ease his own busy day by immediately putting the GALAXY Note II to task, making calls during a taxi journey, checking the day's schedule on the S Planner and making changes on the fly.

In his first client meeting of the day, Ahuja takes memos using S Note. He updates his teams and reschedules a meeting before leaving. "I don't have my own PA, so I need to ensure I'm working as efficiently and quickly as possible," he says. "The advancement of mobile devices such as this allows me to seemingly be in multiple places at once."

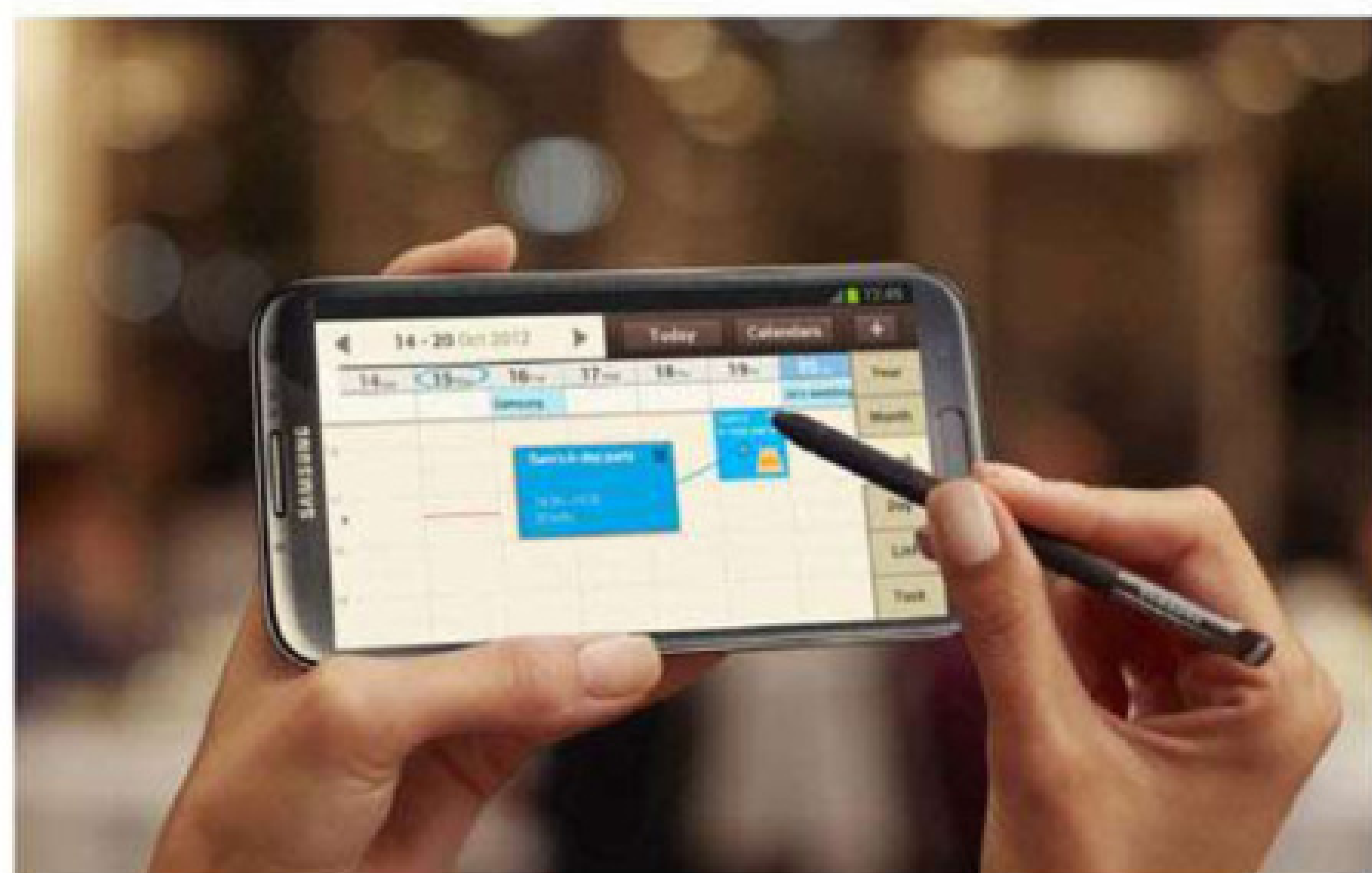
Using Multi Window to multitask, Ahuja spends his lunchtime tweaking an afternoon presentation, doing this directly on the GALAXY Note II's responsive 5.5-inch touchscreen. Ahuja also consults his 'mind map' – a visual diagram of his thoughts on a current project – taking a photo and using Easy Clip to cut out some brainstormed ideas, then sharing these with his colleagues.

"On many occasions, the best ideas come when you're least expecting them," he says, "so being able to not only capture these creative thoughts, but to digitally edit and share them in this way is a powerful tool."



Another feature that Ahuja makes use of is All Share Cast, which enables him to easily and wirelessly show presentation content controlled from the GALAXY Note II's screen on a client's television. It's the kind of high-end functionality that really makes the most of the phone's 1.6GHz quadcore processor.

"Having it just connect to other devices and just work is exactly how technology should function," Ahuja says.



KILLER FEATURE

"**S Planner** means I can keep on top of my daily schedule – essential as my appointments change on a minute-by-minute basis and I don't have a PA"

<http://www.gizmodo.co.uk/your-mobile-life>



"IT'S HOW MODERN
WORKING LIFE
SHOULD BE: FAST,
EFFICIENT AND
EFFECTIVE"
RAHUL AHUJA,
ENTREPRENEUR



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"IT'S A GREAT DEVICE FOR
KEEPING MY WORK AND
HOME LIFE IN ORDER"
JONATHAN ERDMAN,
LEGAL PROFESSIONAL

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4/ JONATHAN ERDMAN THE LEGAL GUY

Jonathan Erdman works in law, a frantic environment where deadlines are tight and organisation is key. To stay on top, he needs to be plugged into his latest cases at all times, whether he's in or out the office, and so mobile connectivity is essential. He says: "It's a high-pressure environment. Accurate delivery of information to and from me is indispensable. The quicker it can happen, the better."

Taking a client call on his headphones, Erdman is also able to check a relevant memo as it appears in his inbox. While still on the call, he's able to edit the memo on the 16:9 widescreen and send the updated information to the involved legal departments. Having these abilities means information is captured, agreed and delivered within a few minutes, rather than hours.

On his way to an office meeting, Erdman receives an email to say an immediate external visit is required. He uses the GALAXY Note II's Multi Window feature to simultaneously recheck the email and consult a map for directions. He also updates his shared calendar to alert his colleagues of the change in plan.

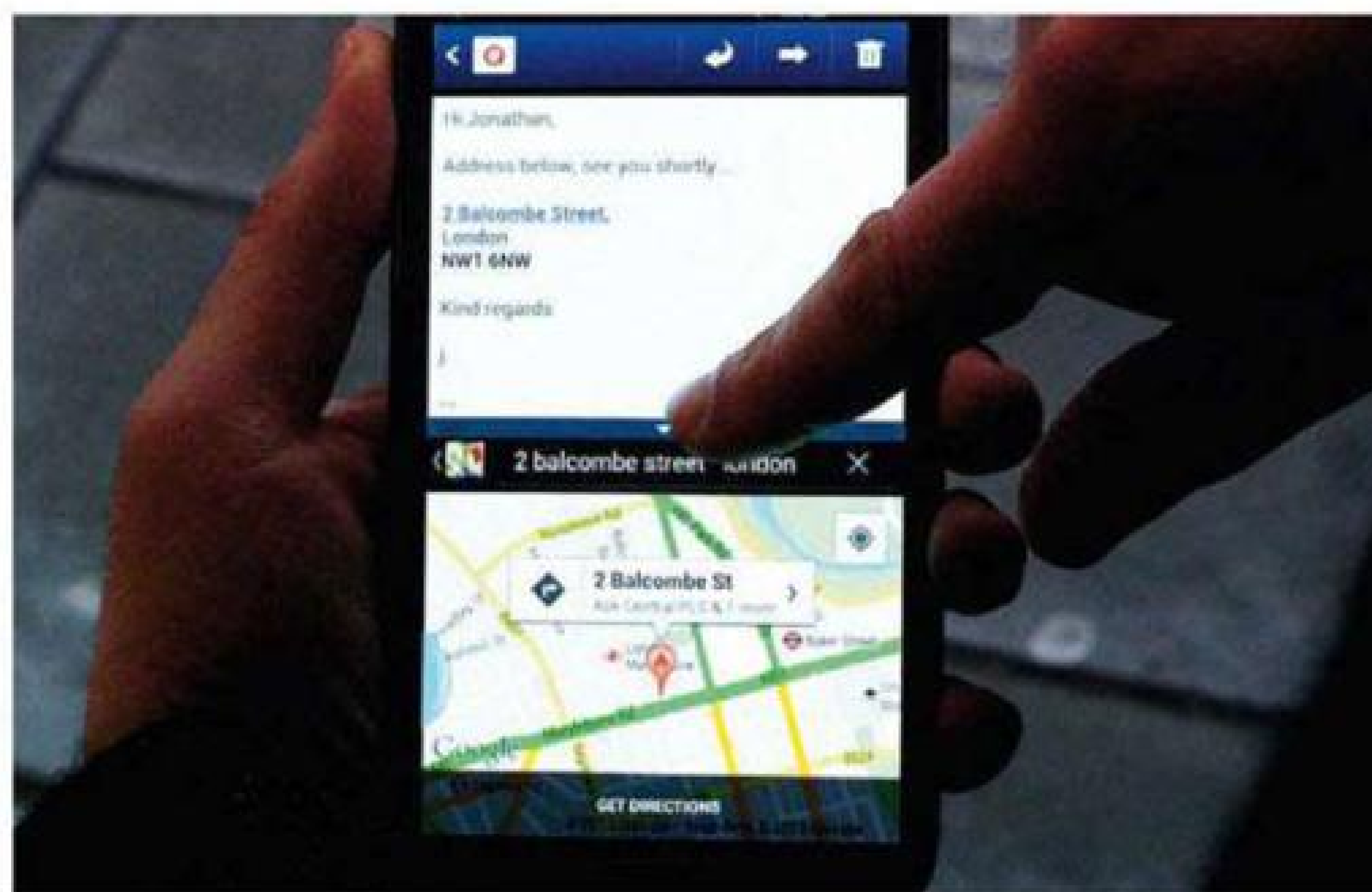
"Making sure your team are informed of last-minute changes is crucial," he explains. "However, keeping tabs on your personal life amidst the chaos is also a skill."

Case in point: today is Erdman's girlfriend's birthday. On the return leg from the client meeting, he makes a digital birthday card in S



Note and sends it to his girlfriend. He uses the phone's fast Internet browser to check for the nearest florist on his route home, stopping off to pick up a bunch of roses.

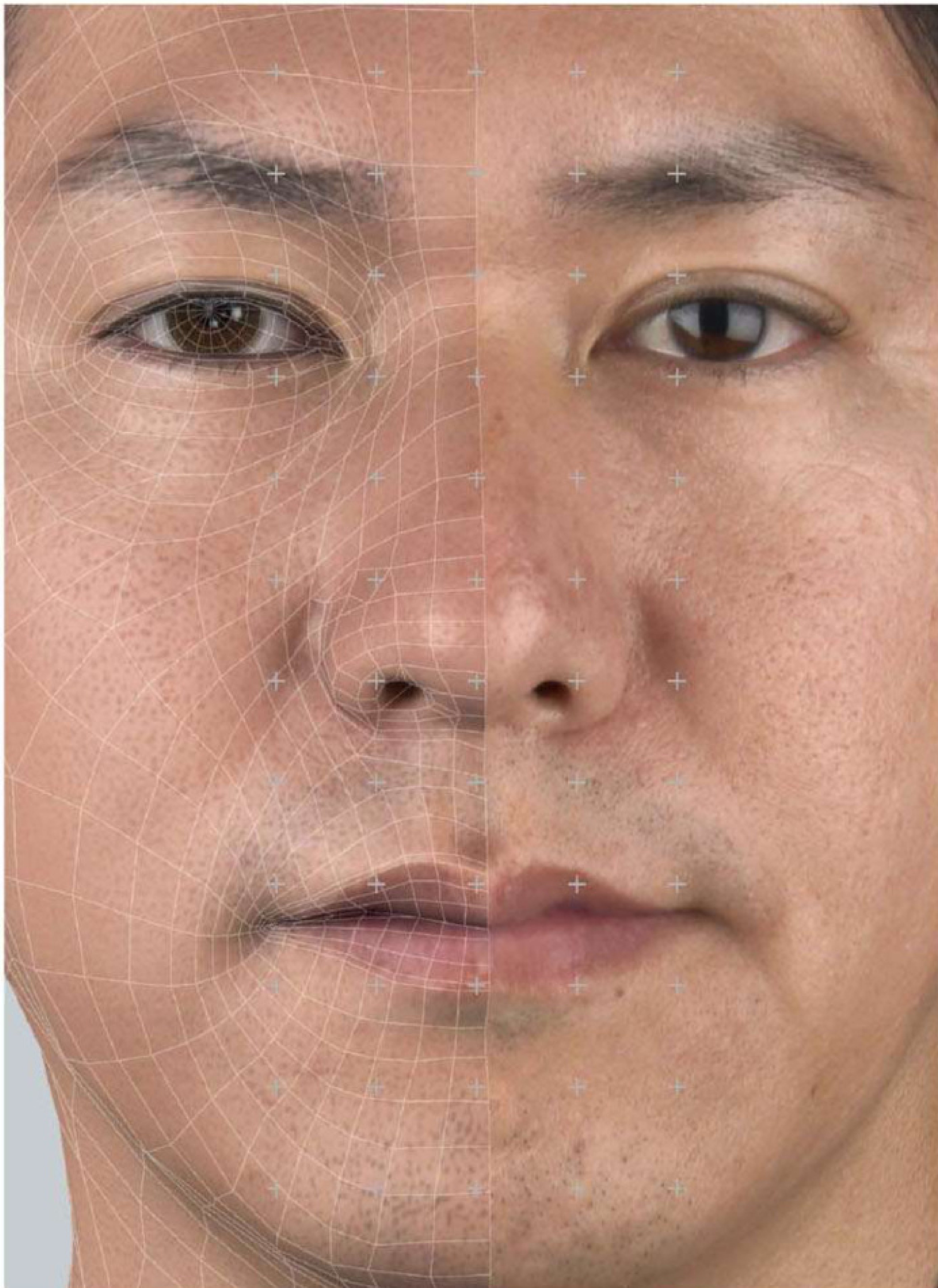
All of which illustrates why he finds the GALAXY Note II an invaluable aid. "It's a great device for keeping my work and home life in order. The widescreen fits so much information on it, which is great for multitasking." ■



KILLER FEATURE
"Multi Window, along with the powerful quadcore processor and huge screen, allows me to multitask on a serious level"

<http://www.gizmodo.co.uk/your-mobile-life>

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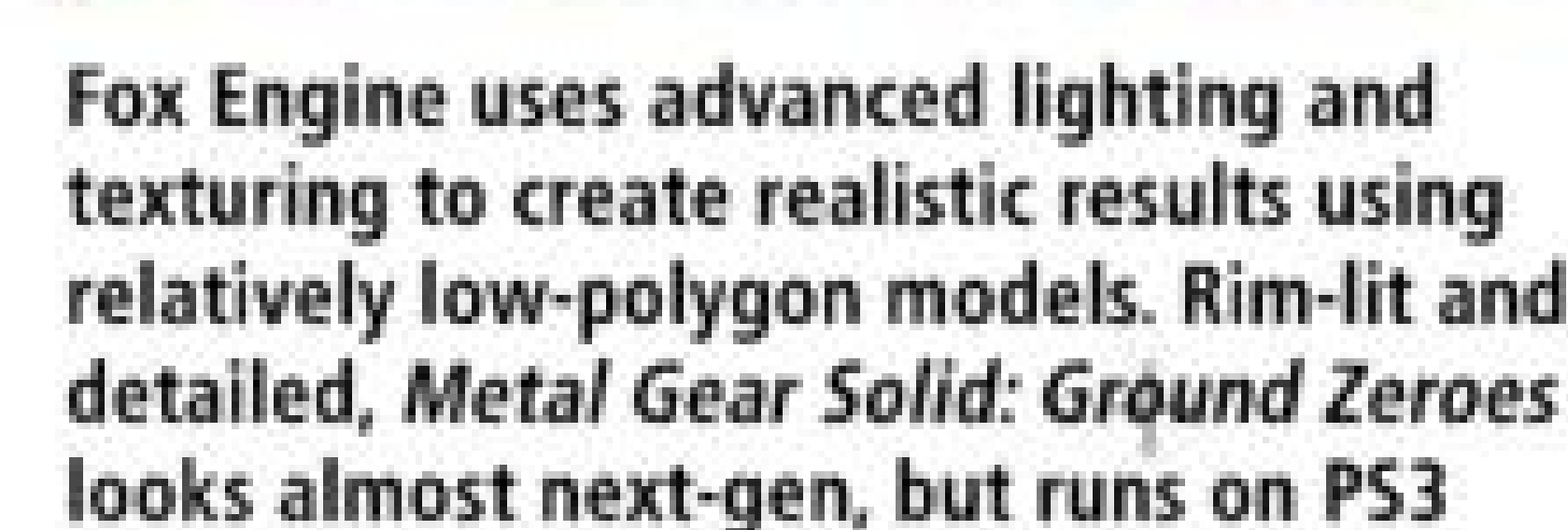


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It's no revelation, especially in the UK, where FIFA currently outsells *Pro Evo* by a ratio of around 20:1. But the cultural attitude towards failure in Japan is, historically, one of denial and shame. "Failure is seen as an embarrassment best avoided," explains Tokyo-based tech journalist



In 2009, Konami decided to break the restrictions of its development structure and adapted to market realities. "We couldn't overhaul our old engine in the yearly



H O W F O X E N G I N E T R A N S F O R M S V I S U A L S



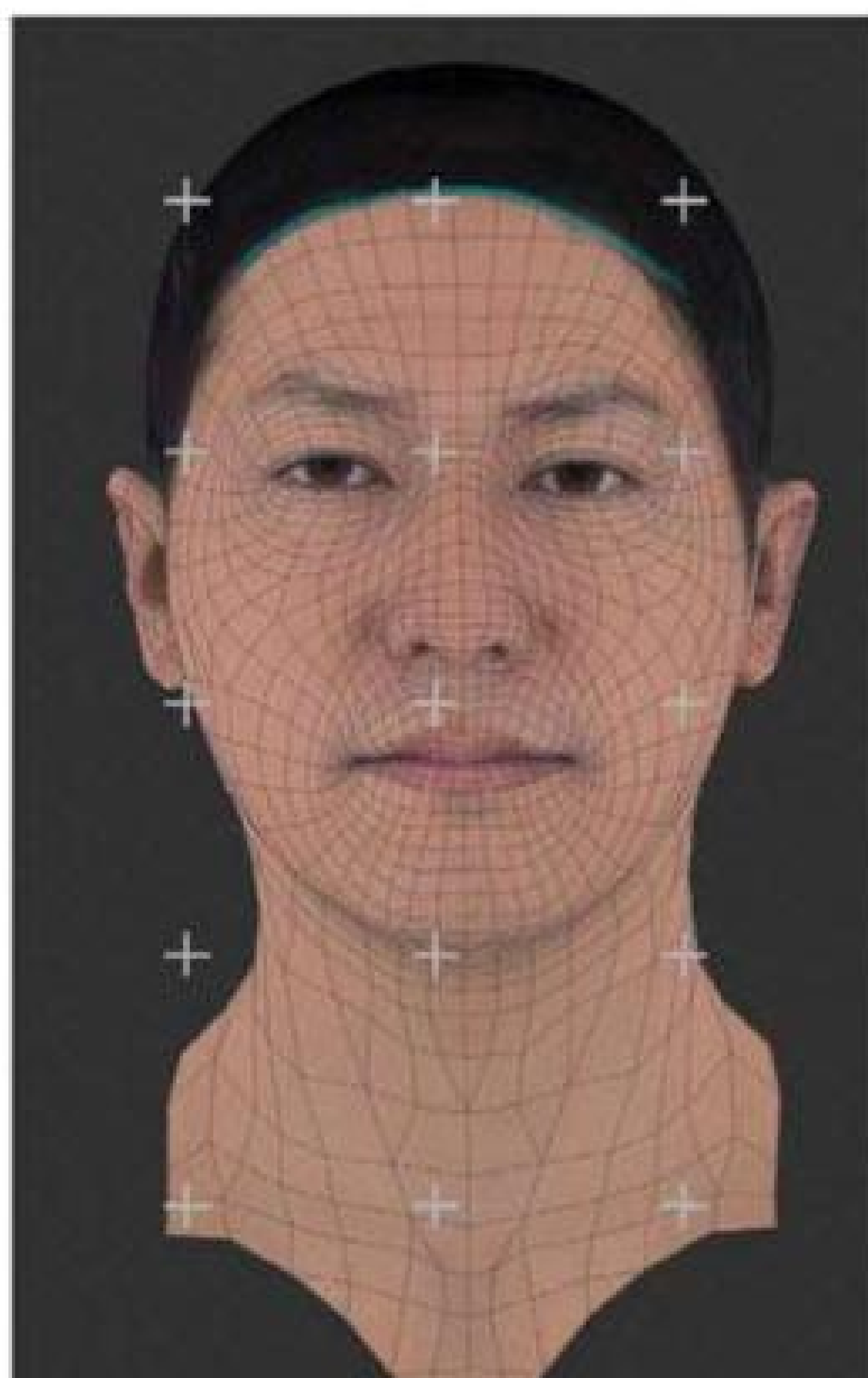
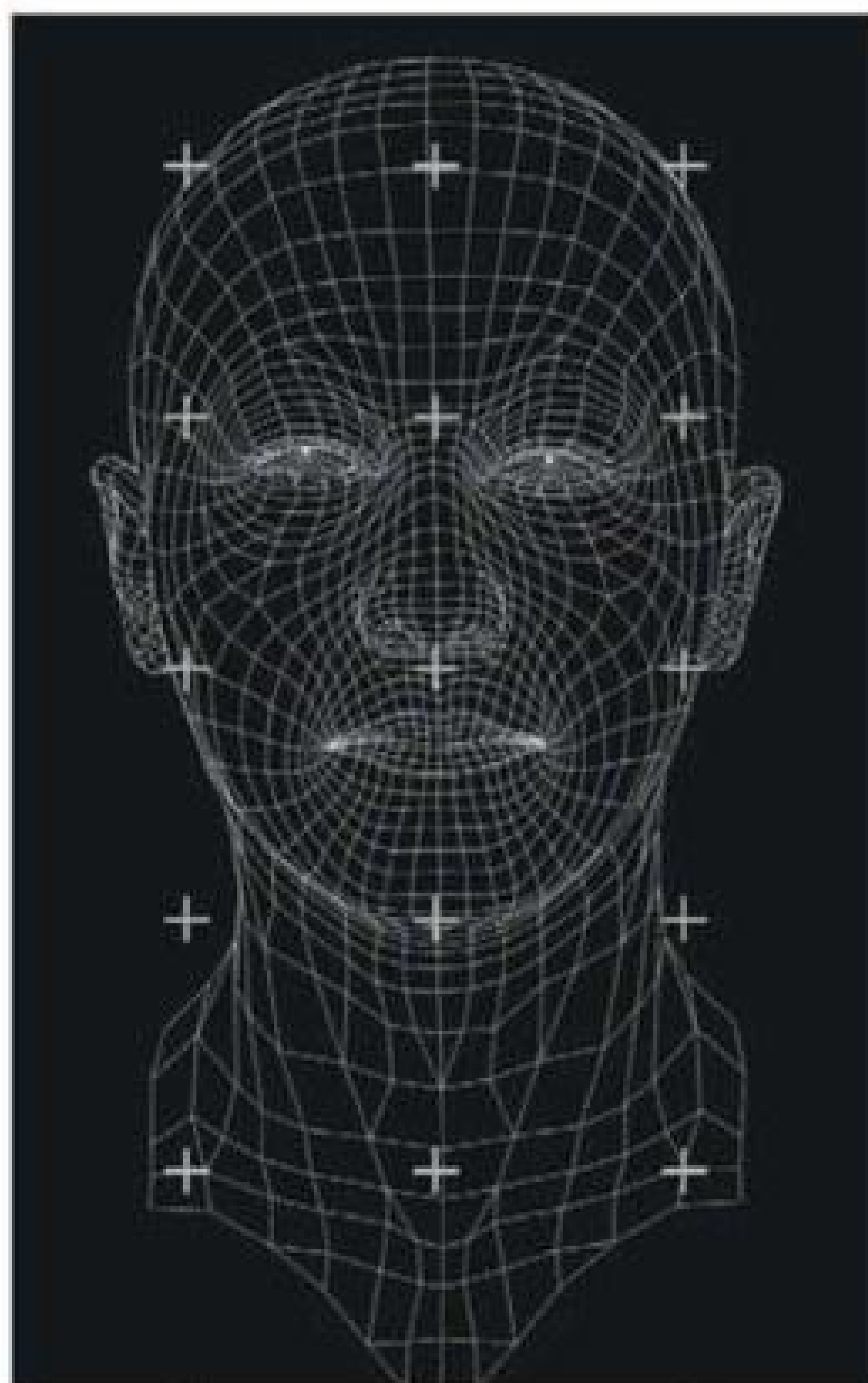
"The fundamentals of our new engine are based on Fox Engine, especially the visuals," explains Masuda. We're shown two images of Old Trafford at kick off: one real, one computer generated. They're near indistinguishable and only some intricate background detail betrays the CG version. In terms of quality, think of the Fox Engine 'boardroom' test image with the horse tweeted by Hideo Kojima.

The new engine has a tool that dynamically renders accurate sunray reflections and shadows according to the position of the light, its angle and power. Tools provide precise values, whereas previously artists had to look at images and approximate the colour balance using their judgement. The reflections even alter due to the slant and angle of the grass as well as because of the weather conditions. It looks incredible, but we're assured it's all running on PS3.

We're shown similar side-by-side images of balls and boots, using specular shading that captures the coating and grain of the material. The real boot looks faker than the in-game image, since it had never been worn. Kits will be more accurate than ever, too, thanks to linear texturing, which recreates the actual colour of an object. In the past, colour values were a gamma approximation taken by looking at a monitor. The new in-game kits even mimic the difference in vertical and horizontal weaves.

Finally, we're shown our cover render, a 3D model of Kei Masuda's head. *PES 2013* has great player likenesses, but this is near photo-real. It's a 2,000,000-polygon model shrunk to 2,000 polygons, but the lighting and surface scattering creates a realistic skin texture. We're told the engine allows models like this to be made in a few days instead of a week.

Throughout our visit, most of our questions about Kojima Productions are answered indirectly, but the *Pro Evo* team do meet with up with the company to discuss features. The team also admits that some of Fox Engine's texture library isn't that natural for its uses, given Kojima Productions isn't emulating objects from real life.



development cycle," admits creative producer **Kei Masuda**. "The schedule was too demanding. We reflected on the difficult transition [from PS2 to PS3], and could see the next-gen coming. We needed to make a new engine."

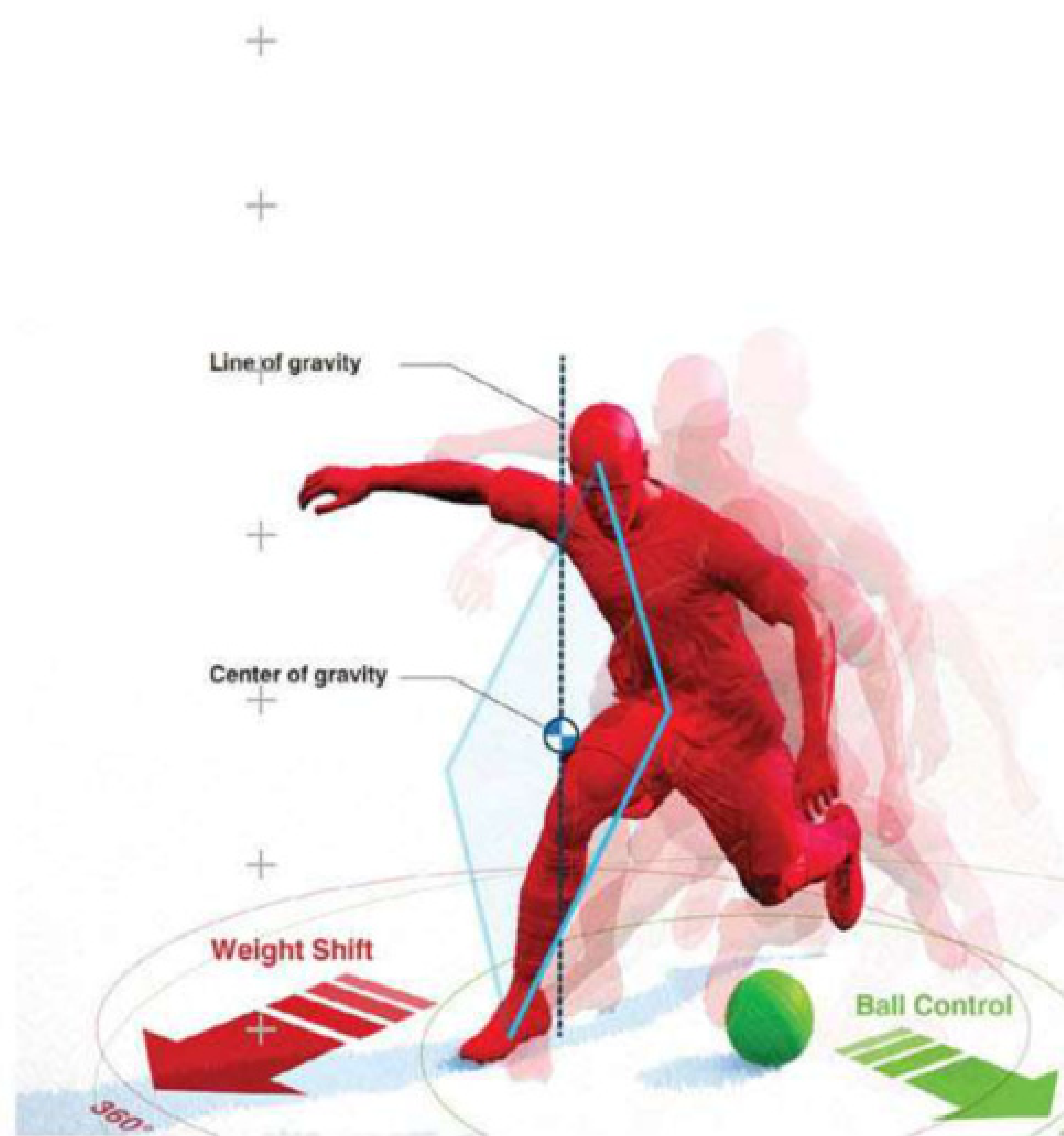
Konami created a sub-team dedicated to 'trial and error', working on a modified version of Kojima Productions' Fox Engine. The engine's tools are built to streamline complex processes, such as asset creation and testing, plus allow easier cross-platform development. "Our new engine isn't limited to the next few years, but [is ready] for next-gen platforms," says senior producer **Naoya Hatsumi**.

In other words, *Pro Evo's* new engine is built for uncertainty, so the team can adapt to evolving market conditions. "It is not just about making games for the TV; the engine can adapt to any platform, like tablet or mobile," says Masuda.

Indeed, he is acutely aware of the wider debate about the validity of console gaming in a tablet age. "The concern is fewer people will have time to pick up their controllers and play games on the TV. This market has shrunk, so we want to make it possible to, say, edit players on your phone or alter formations, so when you turn on your game, you can instantly start playing with your favoured presets. We want *PES* to fit around users' lifestyles."

In late January, Konami didn't know final next-gen console specs or was too coy to share them, but Masuda seemed open-minded about their implications. "We need to think outside the box of next-gen consoles. One aspect might be how users communicate with each other. For example, how do you capture your face on your

"We reflected on the difficult transition [from PS2 to PS3], and could see the next-gen coming. We needed to make a new engine"



The barycentre is the player's point of balance, which isn't necessarily in the centre of his body

phone and share it with another user? It might be via social networks, and there might be new ways to invite your friends to play from multiple places – for example, to take part in an 11 versus 11 game. On PS3, that's the Holy Grail, but in the future it might be a more personal experience [such as] where you control a key player all match, like in *El Clasico*. It's an experience you can't get in reality."

In the short term, the team will use Fox Engine to shape *Pro Evo* for current-gen consoles, but there will be far more to this than a mere

graphical update – the team's aim is to create competition among unequal players by changing the rules of engagement. The new game will feature revamped physics and controls designed to create intriguing struggles between slow, strong players and their smaller, more agile opponents.

Player movement will also be detached from the ball, so you'll be able to drop a shoulder to unbalance an opposing player even before the ball arrives. It isn't yet clear how you'll control your player's body, but it's likely a function mapped to the right stick.



Creative producer Kei Masuda provided the basis for our cover star

WHAT'S OUR MOTIVATION?

We were shown footage from a top-level game that ended 3-3, with a graph of players' motivation levels over time. Stronger players were less affected by adverse events such as conceding a goal, and their actions would, in turn, affect the crowd. The aim is to give matches a more natural sense of flow, with game-changing moments – penalties, outrageous skill or crunching tackles – eliciting a crowd response. Again, it isn't yet clear how the crowd will affect a player's core stats, but the team discussed a drop in energy levels, a reduced ability to play long passes, or for players to keep their formation, or vice versa. Crowd influence and player mentality will be updated according to seasonal results, though it's unclear if this will be in realtime or via updates at set intervals.



The new engine employs barycentre physics, giving players more realistic centres of balance relative to their technique. For instance, a skilled striker may be able to accurately toe-poke a shot with his right foot, even as his weight is falling to the left after a heavy collision. This concept extends to collisions, too, and defenders – under your control – can tug strikers' shirts, or place their arms over shoulders to secure the best position for a free header before the ball arrives.

While these physics simulations alter the nature of competition, Konami aims to innovate with more intangible attributes as well. Home and away crowds will have a direct affect on a team's performance, so a volatile stadium, such as Elland Road, Celtic Park or Carrow Road, would lift the home players' spirits and unsettle the opposition. How this manifests itself in play is unclear, but the notion is that teams may be made to pass less accurately or lose their shape under pressure.

PES 2013 has 40 or so star players with individual attributes, such as Ronaldo's upright running stance or shoulders-puffed free kicks. The new game is said to greatly enhance the number of such players and signature movements will be tracked over a season.

A player's mental strength will be represented as well, so fighters such as Keane, Vieira or Gerrard will be less affected by crowd noise.

This will likely be recreated via a formal stat, with captains able to inspire those around them.

The goal is to recreate real football culture and the romance of 'giant killings'. Currently, online *PES 2013* players are almost obliged to choose Barcelona, Real Madrid or Paris Saint-Germain if they want to win. In the future, Konami hopes crowd factors – performing a nutmeg in a Brazilian game will elicit wild cheers, for instance – plus an increased emphasis on a team's formational effectiveness will make for more nuanced and competitive matches.

"We don't just want to capture the individual act of scoring a goal and winning, but focus on how the team works as a group to create that feeling," says Masuda. The new engine even allows for recreations of real team strategies – Real Madrid's rapier counterattacks, or Spain's choking pressure – with scope for customisation.

We're shown an early version of the formation menu, where you can assign tactics to specific zones. The pitch is divided into squares and you can tailor approach by location. For example, you can set your full-back to overlap aggressively in one zone to target a weak defender, or for defenders to double up when a superstar enters the final third. You'll choose where on the pitch your best players do their work.

At least that's the theory. We're shown a top-down demo of dots shifting in tight patterns, but it's hard to gauge how it will affect play. In truth, *PES 2013* already has a detailed tactics system and on higher difficulties you need to 'unlock' top opponents via shrewd formation shifts. It's arguably *Pro Evo's* core strength, but betrays its key flaw: clarity.



The studio is an expanse of uniform workstations

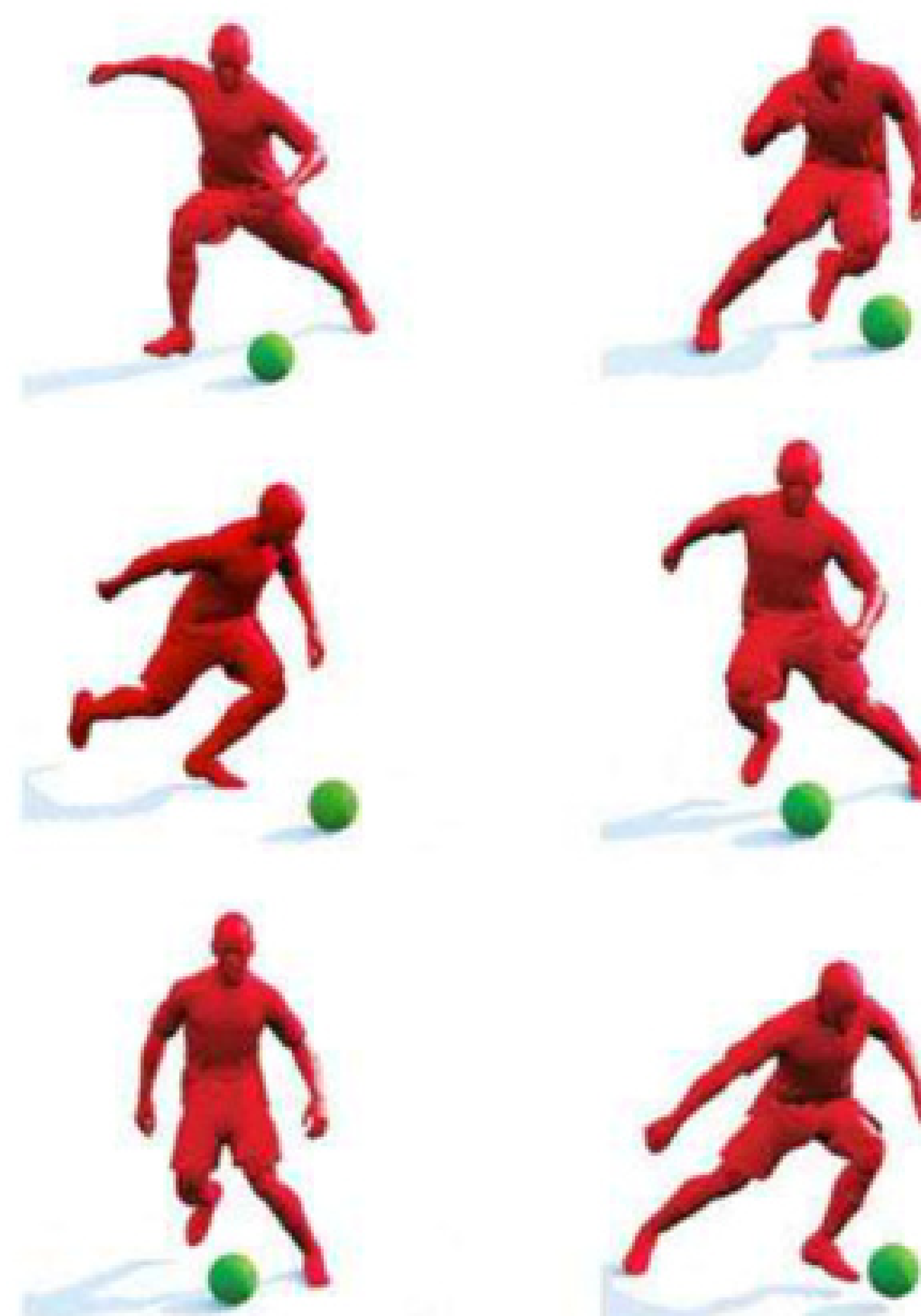
P I L L A R S O F T H E N E W P E S E N G I N E

1

BARYCENTRE PHYSICS AND BALL CONTROL

The new engine allows for a larger separation between player and ball – three times the radius of *PES 2013*, where tight ‘confrontation’ zones are used to make tackling easier. A striker will be able to throw his body weight in one direction and use his opposing foot to push the ball in the other way, leaving defenders off balance and buying space for a pass or shot. Players have specific centres of balance, calculated by locating their centre of gravity, or barycentre. You’ll be able to control your player’s weight shifts at all times and use precise touches to push the ball away from your feet. We

see a wireframe demo with more natural animations and fluid transitions than *FIFA 13*. You control the player and the physics drives the animation, not vice versa. It’s hard to tell how this will transform the ‘feel’ of play, rather than just being admirable behind-the-scenes calculations, but there appears to be scope for a radical new control scheme – think of how *Skate*’s right-stick motions mimicked real-life movements by exploiting dynamic physics, and how they compared to the digital button taps of *Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater*. This could be a revelation in football game control.

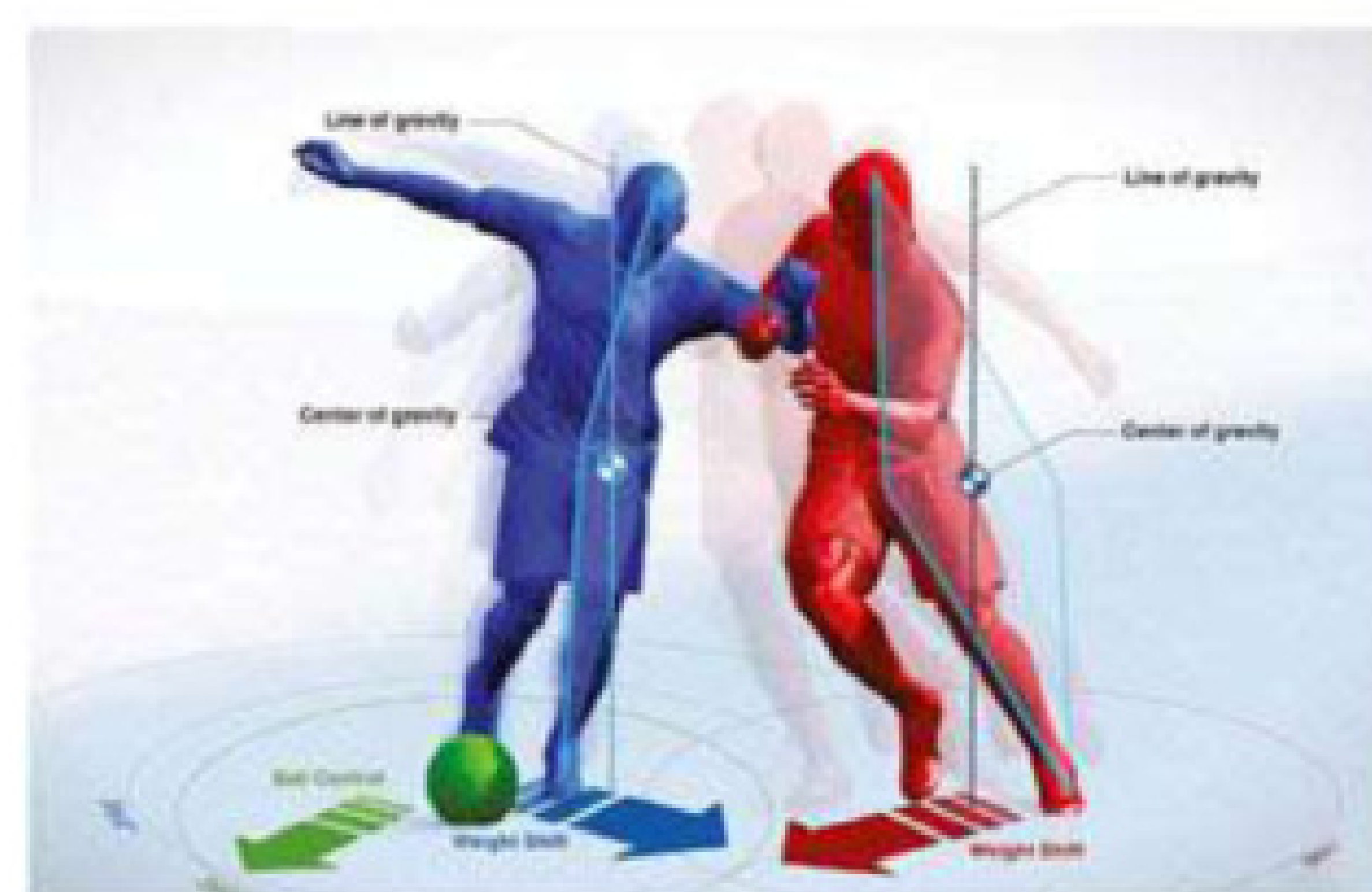


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CONTACT AND PHYSICALITY

Konami has pinpointed this as a weakness in previous games, but now players can jostle for space – even without the ball present – for headers at corners, or to dominate a smaller opponent. You’ll be able to tug shirts (cloth is now separate from the player’s body and stretches) as well as elbow for room on

the touchline. It works in tandem with the physics and precision control. Agile players can unbalance defenders with dropped shoulders or ball skills, and push the ball further ahead to exploit their acceleration. “Previously, body feints were more aesthetic,” admits Masuda. “Now they’re a key tactic.”



3

SQUAD EMULATOR

Formations remain essential for success, but now you can set ‘zones of play’ so your key players focus on certain tactics in mission-critical areas. For example, you can set your front line to focus on possession and probing for gaps in front of a deep-lying defence. In theory, you’ll be able to recognise

your favourite team’s pattern of play within a few minutes. The emphasis on defending and shape should allow weaker teams to create effective strategies, such as when Celtic beat Barcelona in the Champions League by defending deep, buoyed up by the home crowd.



ALTERING THE FLOW

"Fox Engine allows us to be more efficient, making it much easier to replace and test objects," explains Masuda. "In the future, the idea is that anyone, from programmer to artist, has the ability to participate with visuals or AI."

Konami's hope is that a more streamlined asset production process will allow for extended testing.

Fox Engine's impact on team size is less clear, but given the wider console market, publishers can't afford the next-gen to bring the leap in development team sizes that greeted the transition from PS2 to PS3. "PS3 team sizes are ten times that of PS2," admits Masuda, who feels they were unlikely to grow at that rate on next-gen.

"Ideally, with the new tech and engine, it will take fewer people to make a condensed game, but it's not as simple as numbers. New tech affects external partners, and the engine needs more maintenance."

For newcomers, navigating PES 2013's formation menus means facing a confusing, ill-explained sea of dots. Even the 'tutorial' mode to explain its trickier skill moves – which often require split-second *Street Fighter*-style timing – fails to make its demands explicit. Just ask someone who's

tried to pull off the swerving 'knuckle shot', a near-miracle feat on a training pitch, let alone during play. Skill moves needn't necessarily be easy, but they do need to be clear, especially when you're trying to lure in players hardwired for *FIFA*.

To this end, Konami hopes to simplify the next *Pro Evo*'s controls without reducing the capacity for skill or variety of outcomes. You can control a player's centre of balance even without the ball. "Rather than activate preset skills and animation frames, you'll control the actual ball, using your body to perform [moves such as] a step over," explains team leader **Jon Murphy**. The idea is that you'll need a better idea of how tricks work in real life, rather than via complex button presses. Similarly, you'll get full, physics-driven control of the first touch and the ability to flick the ball ahead if you like.

"Traditionally, pressing triangle has been a through ball," says Masuda, "but we'd like to create moves in more intuitive ways, so people who don't like football games can get used to it."

Integrating existing control schemes without inhibiting the potential of the new engine seems a tricky challenge, but Masuda believes "current users will easily adapt. We'll keep the parts that

were good but add new controls for more precision." We also know that Konami is experimenting with 'assisted' controls to ease progress for new players.

From what we can discern – bearing in mind the vagaries of translation and that these are the early stages of development – the focus on physics and new methods of control could prove transformative for football games. They might herald a sea change akin to EA's *Skate*; in other words, taking a once primarily digital universe defined by the likes of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* and turning it into a dynamic world governed by simulation and imagination. For digital recreations of the beautiful game, this means a world in which the ball exists entirely separately to the player.

In theory, *Pro Evo*'s adoption of Fox Engine technology places it in a position of enviable technical advantage – certainly until EA unveils its next-gen plans. The subtext of our two days of presentations and questioning, however, is that Konami is either unsure how to harness its potential, worried about upsetting fans by deviating from tradition,

or playing its cards very close to its chest.

So after years of lagging behind *FIFA*, the *Pro Evo* team seems caught between the safety of conservatism and the risky, but potentially game-changing, path of innovation. That tension was evidenced in the answer to many of our questions. Will the game's controls be altered to harness the new physics? A team member interjects that Konami "wouldn't alienate hardcore fans". It shows there's a danger here of being held hostage by a small, passionate, but



Can the team offer realism and accessibility?

increasingly demanding community at a time when *Pro Evo* needs to embrace new fans.

Yes, Konami is entering the next generation with leading new technology underpinning its game, but the issue here is cultural. This is a studio on the edge of something exciting, but it isn't clear whether it will be able to overhaul its philosophy and truly embrace it. It's a view with which our host concurs, but there's clearly a mood of optimism among the renewed *Pro Evolution Soccer* team.

"We're very tired," jokes Masuda. "It is an exciting time, but we still have troubles. I still enjoy it... Yes, this is a good time."

Yet the tension remains. The entrepreneurial spirit of the new team and its new engine isn't reflected in the studio's rows of identical workstations, or Konami's corporate protocol.

We have to seek special permission to take a picture of the reception desk and are stopped from taking a picture of the 'Konami van' – a two-inch model of the mobile stall where the company began. An equally lengthy debate surrounds our decision to photograph an office that, to our eyes, looks identical from any angle. Later that night, it takes seven workmen to navigate us around a ten-metre obstruction on the pavement.

Despite this, there's a conviction in the team's beliefs and we see a sprinkling of youthful 'rebel' spirits to augment the established studio members. Notably, the figurehead for the PS2 *Pro Evo* games, Shingo 'Seabass' Takatsuka, is conspicuous by his absence.

Is this a sign of a new era? "There are so many things we want to do, and accepting we couldn't do these things wasn't motivating in the

This is a studio on the edge of something exciting, but it isn't clear whether it will be able to overhaul its philosophy and embrace it



The ball control radius is three times bigger than it is in *PES 2013*, allowing off-the-ball tussles for space

past," says manager **Toru Kato**. "However, the new engine means we have to take new challenges, which has motivated the team. Although we do have a rival, we are trying to be... Well, not a family, but united."

We're then shown a wireframe demo of the physics, and animation. A smaller player jinks his way past a larger opponent, who leaves a leg out, causing the attacker to wobble. In an older *PES*, the result would have been binary: the attacker would either fall or stay mobile, a slave to two animation presets. In the new

engine, the outcome is far more unpredictable – a factor of the player's balance, skill, speed and the intensity of the collision.

We watch as the attacker wobbles, lays a hand on the turf and, just as he's about to topple, regains momentum, surging forward with the ball. As EA and Konami face the next generation of football games on new hardware, the *Pro Evo* team must be hoping for similar results – perhaps this upheaval represents a new competition among unequal opponents, with Konami rewriting the terms of engagement. ■



FROM TOP **Jon Murphy**, team lead, and **Toru Kato**, *PES* team manager

K O J I M A

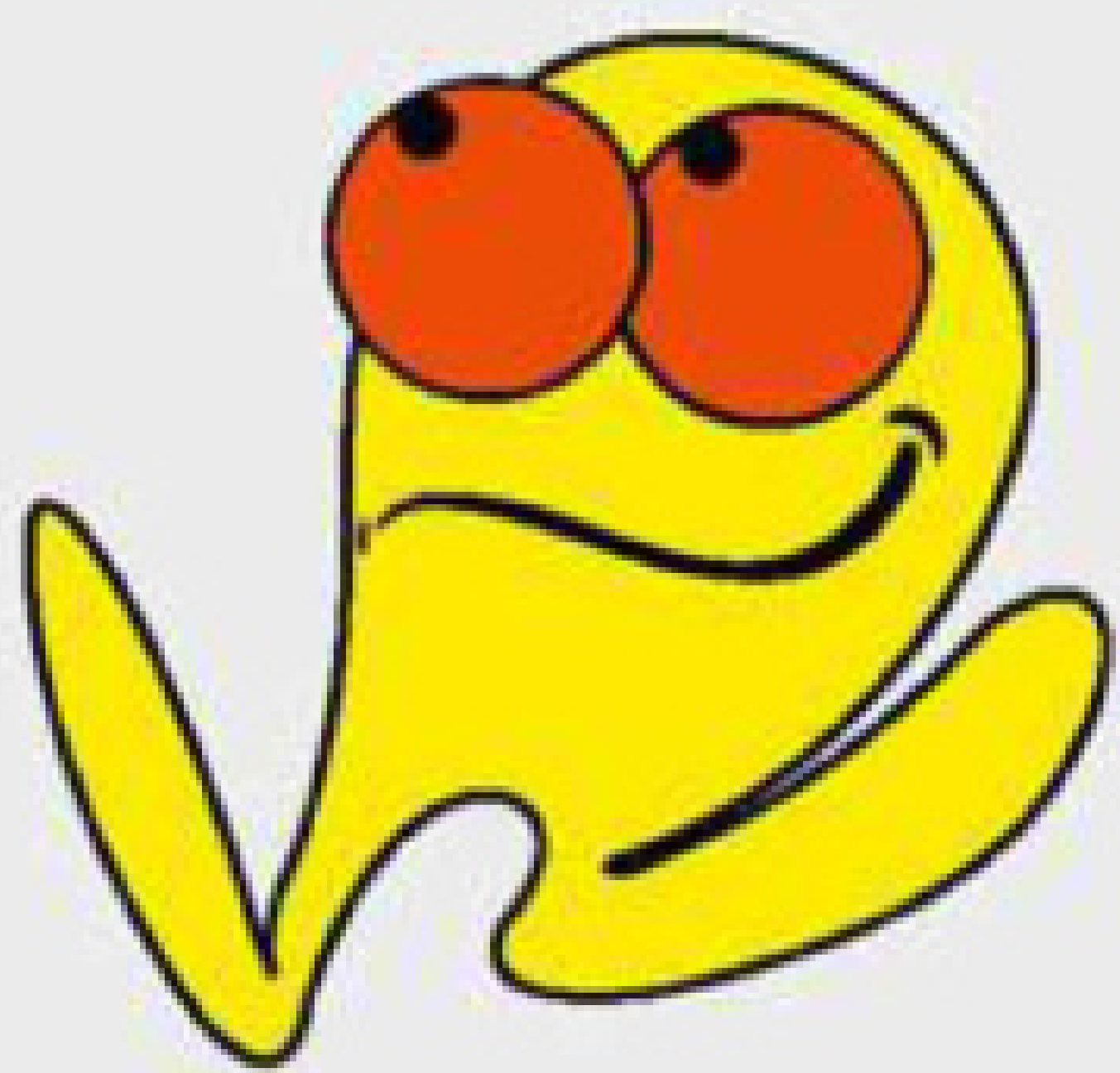


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They had a systematic approach to development, and their engine was not just their core engine, but also included all the tools and everything else. In the old days, a modeller would work on [a bottle] for a month, but wouldn't show it to anyone, since it was incomplete. They've no idea how this object is going to be used, and obsess about making it high quality. In western studios, they'd use an incomplete model

It's possible to make many things more realistic, but that doesn't mean you should. You have to prioritise, and that is what's going to separate the teams

Honestly, I think all of that is good and great. Social aspects, the multidevice direction: that's correct, that's the way to go. But just because it has these features doesn't mean it's going to be a success. What will really determine whether or not it sells is what titles will be available for the platform. And unfortunately, even though I am friends with Mark Cerny, he's never told me what other studios are working on. I even ate a meal with him recently and he didn't tell me anything. ■



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Why has the console library become so full of human protagonists and 'realistic'

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art styles, and is there any hope for different types of character to return in 2013?

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Recall the console chart shelves of your local game store in the latter months of 2011? On one row you might have seen the silvery silhouette of a soldier with an orange glow defining his right side. Another featured a stubbly adventurer on sand dunes, a wrecked airliner behind him. A bit further on you'd see a monochrome version of a comics icon atop a gargoyle with a splash of blood across his fist. And nearby would be a gnarled hulk of a man leaning on a gun as the amber-hued spires of a ruined world loomed behind him. Many games had a three in the title, but that's not the throughline; all of these boxes depicted the playable human

characters inside. Not strictly realistic humans, perhaps, but grittily realised, with dirt under their nails and driven by steely determination.

Blockbuster console games are similar today. In the '80s and '90s, however, they were primarily filled with the effigies of a whole menagerie of beasts and cartoon heroes. Sonic The Hedgehog, Donkey Kong, Crash Bandicoot and Alex Kidd were the ones who graced boxes back then. What changed, technology, the industry, or players?

Before the mid-'90s and the advent of consoles powerful enough to render characters made of polygons, sprite limitations were the be all and end all of character design. Mario's

mere 16x32 pixels and tight colour palette in *Super Mario Bros* made him a direct product of those limitations. Talking to Naughty Dog co-president **Evan Wells**, it's clear technical constraints continued to play a role in early 3D games, too. He explains how they informed the look of original PlayStation star Crash Bandicoot: "We had to pick characters that just had very easy shapes. That's why you wound up with characters with big heads and big eyes. You might only get a pixel to represent the pupil of an eye, and you want to make sure that you can read expression on [them]."

But when the time came to develop a new series for PS2, the extra processing power on

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offer gave the team the option to move towards free-roaming, fully 3D worlds and put more detail in character models. Extensive tools development and the influence of *Mario 64* resulted in *Jak And Daxter*, which paired a humanoid elf with a half-otter, half-weasel sidekick. "We wanted to take a step towards human," explains Wells. "[Jak's] an elf, so he's kind of human-esque. We felt we could render a humanoid character pretty well and convincingly. The head size could shrink and we didn't have to go as fantastic."

By 2003's *Jak II*, Naughty Dog had realised that the market had shifted. Darker, more mature themes were selling and console

gamers were getting older. It decided to alter Jak to suit, giving the once-quiet hero a dark, bitter side. In explaining this new take on the elfin protagonist, co-founder **Jason Rubin** said at the time: "Gamers like me are still playing. I'm 33 and what I want now is very different from what I wanted ten years ago. Ten years ago you didn't have the choice to play *Grand Theft Auto*. You played *Mario* because *Mario* was what's available."

Some of his words are mirrored in the Entertainment Software Association's reports on videogame consumer demographics. By 2011, they claimed the average age of a game player had reached 37, a figure that

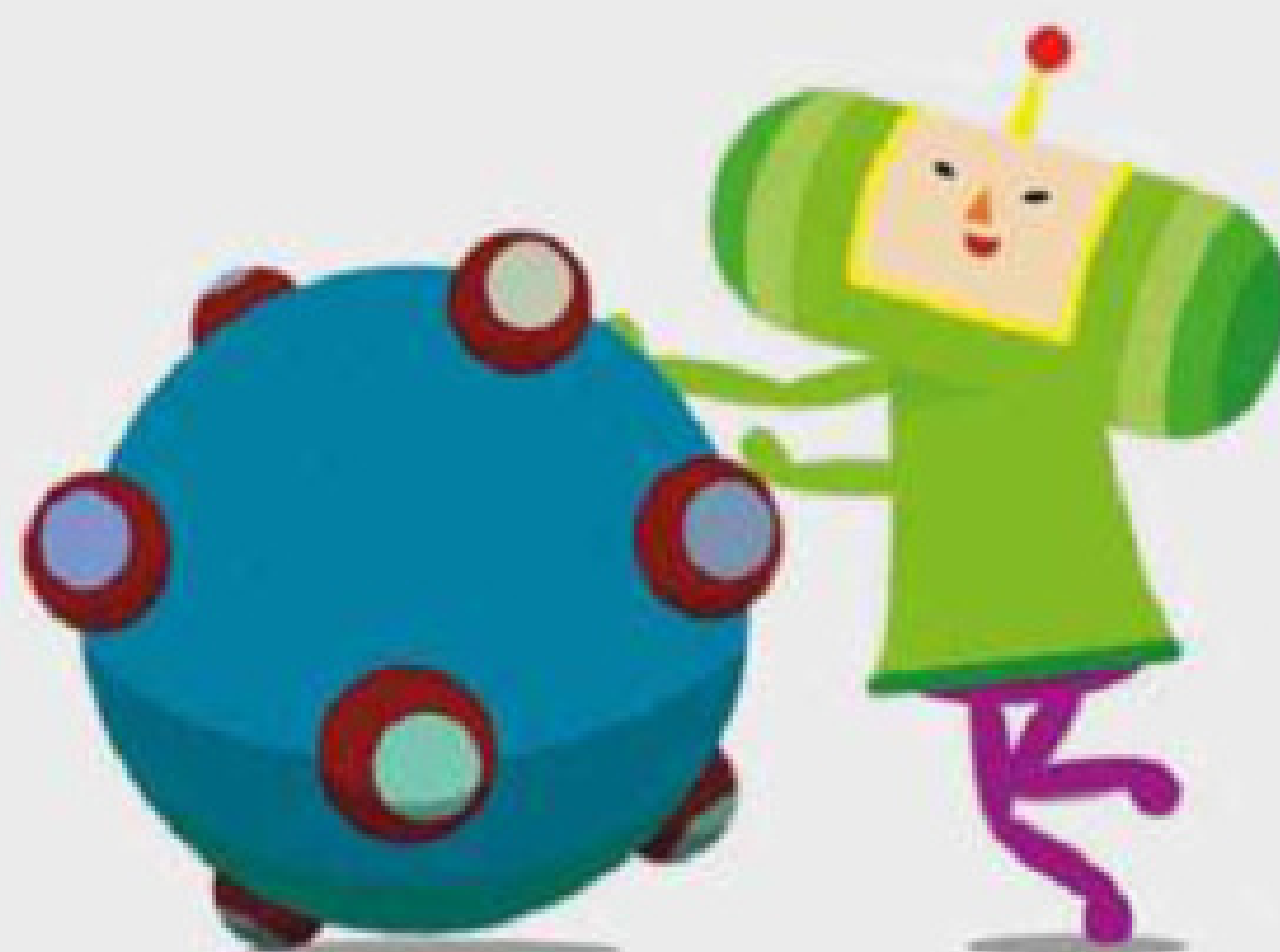
had gradually risen across the 2000s. As a point of reference, the average age in 2005 was 30. As Rubin said, older players don't necessarily want to play as helium-voiced animals; they want games that mirror the sensibilities of the films and TV they watch, and the books they read. To play a game that's pitched at their level also helps affirm their interest – it's hard to admit to friends that you spent last night bouncing around a forest as a squirrel collecting acorns – and realism's also a good way of showing off the power of the hardware in which they've invested.

But there's more than just demographics at work. Insomniac Games, for example, ●

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TO HUMAN



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has a long history of working with cartoony heroes, including *Spyro The Dragon* and *Ratchet and Clank*. It made the shift to realism for its *Resistance* series, which kicked off in 2006, and has been used to promote Sony's hardware ever since. Its villainous alien antagonists, the Chimera, were initially more reptilian than humanoid, but were made more like us to elicit a better response from players.

"Arguably, you ascribe more intelligence to a more human-looking character than you do to one that looks more animalistic," says CEO **Ted Price**. "[That] helped us give these Chimera more personality, even though they don't really have personality."

Concerns of player empathy can define a look as well. "I recall *The Incredibles* was coming out around then," Wells says of the design of Nathan Drake, star of Naughty Dog's *Uncharted*, which debuted in 2007. "So we looked at some chiselled chins and some exaggerated brows and things like that. The team ultimately decided that, realistically, Drake's final character design needed to be simple to forge a player connection.

"A lot of [characters you see in games are] these big, bald, buff space marines. We wanted to our character to be wearing plain clothes, and that's much harder to render and expose some of the subtleties of human

emotion than when you've got big, bulky, hard-surfaced space armour on. We wanted to render hair, we wanted to do animation that really brought out human emotion." In that statement, you can also hear the software engineer celebrating the giddy challenge of reproducing reality.

In **E246**, we visited the Osaka-based Platinum Games, where *Bayonetta* director Hideki Kamiya and president Tatsuya Minami talked about the west's preference for realism, and why Minami believed the Japanese style would have to move towards it. Developers, he said, could no longer afford to focus solely on the domestic scene. With production budgets



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inflating, putting pressure on titles to be globally successful, the predilections of one of gaming's largest markets will affect the kinds of games we see gracing the console charts.

It's hard to underestimate the impact of *Call Of Duty*, which has dominated sales records and the very image of modern gaming. It's shown us that teenagers, who might once have been satisfied with *Banjo-Kazooie*, now desire more adult content (21 per cent of respondents to an IGN survey on the M-rated *COD: Black Ops II* were between 13-17). With \$40m-plus budgets like *COD*'s at stake in modern game development, the conservative money clearly lies with a similarly realistic style.

Not everyone agrees, mind you. There's *Team Fortress 2*, for instance, while Epic – long renowned for *Gears Of War* – is pushing its new engine tech with *Fortnite*, which nods to *TF2*'s cartoon style. As principal artist **Shane Caudle** stresses: "That's totally different from something you'd normally expect from Epic. It's really cartoony and cute and colourful, but it's pushing the envelope on kind of the look of that style as well. We let the game dictate what the art direction's style is going to be."

Perhaps such games are outliers, exercising the power in subverting expectations to stand out among a rash of near-identical fellows. But there's a general sense of change in the air.

The rapid growth of mobile games and the rising prominence of the indie scene has forged a new culture of production, one of smaller teams and budgets, which bring new limitations. And it's hard to argue the cartoon game character is in anything but rude health in the face of Rovio's *Angry Birds*, which has continued to push the idea of the mass-market game out from the console mainstream and into the population at large. Such success is already feeding back into the console world, from the first retail disc bundles of App Store titans to cannily stylised indie games. Perhaps the faces of gaming will diversify again as its audiences and developers do the same. ■

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PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Joe Danger Touch iOS

Hello Games' touchscreen version of *Joe Danger* has a seductive means of drawing you back in. Since your leaderboard position hinges on the cumulative sum of all your individual race scores, it's tempting to peruse the different tour chapters in your portfolio and identify ones that feel like there's still juice left to be squeezed out of them. There's a wonderful sense of optimising in beefing up those scores.

New Super Mario Bros U Wii U

While Wii U's *Mario* launch title lacks the aggressive gameplay innovation of the company's near-perfect *Galaxy* entries, it compensates with the series' most extravagantly polished visuals yet. The vivid primary colours of the Mushroom Kingdom leap off the screen thanks to the console's extra processing muscle, and some of the collectible coins are so deviously placed that, months after release, our completionist radars continue to beep uncontrollably.

Devil May Cry 360, PC, PS3

Like any well designed action-combat game, playing *DmC* feels like performing the deadliest ballet choreography imaginable. Pulling off a seamless, extended combo chain slays your audience. But the stylishness isn't just relegated to the fighting. In this game's world, even getting dressed for the day becomes a chance for Dante to do some zero-gravity, slow-motion pirouetting.

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The perils of pleasing all of the people, all of the time

Games are frequently bogged down by feature creep, collapsing under the weight of all the modes and components that modern marketing recommends. Additional elements are stirred into the mix one by one, and no one notices that the final product has failed to live up to the original vision till it's too late.

It's not referenced quite so often, but it's a problem that affects mechanics, too. In an age where a game's best chance of recouping its development budget is to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, it takes confidence to make a game that revolves around one central tool or mechanic.

This month, *Crysis 3* (p98) is the clearest indicator of how badly things can go when you try to please everyone. Prophet's bow is varied enough to carry a game of its own, but it's just one of too many options at your disposal, and its jumble of ideas gives rise to some unfocused level design. There's an awful lot to like about Crystal Dynamics' *Tomb Raider* (p94) reboot, and again it's a bow that's the star. It's the game's louder moments, when Lara switches to more traditional, crowd-pleasing weaponry, that are also its weakest.

Japan's industry may be struggling, but on this month's evidence its focus is unwavering. Platinum Games is one of the most confident studios on the planet, so it's no surprise that *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* (p90) is built on the foundations of a single tool – Raiden's parry.

Confidence isn't everything, admittedly. Gearbox Software hardly lacked self-esteem during its promotion of *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (p102) and that didn't turn out so well. But in an age where business considerations are having increasing impact on game design, we should cherish the designers who are brave enough to make not what they're told players will like, but what they want to play.



Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

Given Platinum's heritage, it's shocking to discover that Raiden starts *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* without access to a dodge. Our protagonist has no *Bayonetta* cartwheel, no *Viewtiful Joe* evade poses, none of *God Hand*'s lightspeed bobs and weaves. You'll get one eventually, admittedly, but this is a bold opening statement: Platinum wants you to understand right from the word go that this is not a game of escaping danger, but of facing it head on.

There's no dedicated block button either, but tilt the left stick towards an opponent preparing to attack and tap Square to make Raiden raise his sword in a defensive stance, fending off the enemy's strike and staggering you back briefly in block stun. The later you press the button, the shorter the stun; time the press to a handful of frames before the incoming attack connects and you don't stagger at all, instead countering with a swipe of your own sword, stunning not just your attacker but anyone foolish enough to be nearby – the perfect parry.

Parrying is the beating heart of *Rising*, more so even than Free Cutting (FC), the directional slice-and-dice mechanic shown off when the game was unveiled in 2009, before Kojima Productions realised action games weren't its forte and drafted in Platinum. Hold L1 at any time to enter Blade mode, where Square and Triangle perform quick horizontal and vertical swipes, and the right stick enables you to angle a plane to make more precise cuts. You can use this power on the environment, scything through stanchions to bring down bridges and the enemies atop them, or just for fun, splitting a fairground ride into a thousand pieces, the framerate tanking into single figures under the strain. You'll cut paths through doors and fences, too, but Blade mode's principal use is 'Zandatsu', Japanese for 'cut and take', a fancy name for yanking out an enemy's spinal column and squashing it in your palm.

You'll need to whittle down their health first, either through the balletic light-light-heavy combos at your disposal, or if it's an S rank you're after, with a perfect parry. Time slows to a crawl and the screen turns blue – your cue to enter Blade mode and line up your strike with the red square that marks your target. A button prompt appears; tap Circle and Raiden yanks out the neon blue vertebrae, the camera pulling round to face him as he crushes the cyborg matter in his palm, his health and FC gauges replenished in an instant.

Rising's core loop of parry, cut and take is delightful, especially once you start experimenting with it. Apart from a few heavy combo finishers, all your attacks can be cancelled with a parry; you can whale away on a foe with abandon until the very moment an incoming attack connects. Once your opponent is stunned and you're in Blade mode, you needn't go straight for the spine. You can slice up the head and lop off the arms before reaching for that sweet regenerative nectar.

Publisher Konami
Developer Platinum Games, Kojima Productions
Format 360, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now

Rising's core loop of parry, cut and take is delightful, especially once you start experimenting with it

If all this sounds distinctly unlike a *Metal Gear* game so far, don't be fooled; while this is clearly the work of Platinum Games, Kojima Productions' presence is felt in more than just the splash screen. There's that font, of course, the telltale beep when you run low on health, the codec ringtone and the agonised wail from a comrade when you die. There's the story, a stock-in-trade tale of geopolitical posturing, nanomachines and whacking great tanks condensed to fit a much shorter runtime. We open with Raiden guarding the prime minister of a war-torn African state, your employer a private military company (PMC) called Maverick Security that seeks to keep the peace. Desperado Enterprises – a rival PMC whose backer, Marshal World, laments the absence of the war economy from its balance sheet and would rather like it back – takes the opposite tack. Fronted by Sundowner, a hulking, bald Texan flanked by three cyborg lieutenants who are all skilled in melee combat, Desperado sets about destabilising Africa by murdering Raiden's charge, raising a cyborg army with a novel child trafficking/organ harvesting combo and then orchestrating a terrorist attack whose ramifications would outdo even those of 9/11. It's all firmly in Kojima's comfort zone.

Yet Platinum frequently finds ways to remind you whose game you're playing, poking fun at *Metal Gear* history in a way Kojima wouldn't. In one scene-setting early fight, you have no choice but to lose, but then Raiden's arm is sliced off and he mutters, "Shit, not again." Later, he'll wonder aloud why he finds himself "surrounded by death, arguing philosophy with terrorists", a reasonable elevator pitch for the entire *Metal Gear* series. Some enemies are tucked away in dark corners, hiding in cardboard boxes. Sometimes Platinum's fun-poking spreads its wings even further: one cutscene's opening on a stormy sea is too similar to Team Ninja's splash video to possibly be a coincidence.

In your first run through *Rising*, you'll start to get to grips with the system. You'll learn that the red glint in an enemy cyborg's eye lets you know an attack is coming, a yellow one means a grab's on the way, while an orange flash precedes an unblockable attack. You'll study attack patterns and work on your parry timings. You'll venture from Africa to the US, taking down Desperado's leaders and pinching their weaponry: a bo staff for crowd control, an electrically charged sai that stuns enemies and pulls you towards them, and Sundowner's hulking dual blades. You fight the latter on the roof of the Marshal World HQ, the ascent of which is perhaps the best and most varied section in the game. OK, you've taken down the chief antagonist, and it's only chapter four. But this is a *Metal Gear* game, and surely Sundowner is merely the frontman for a more nefarious puppeteer behind the scenes?

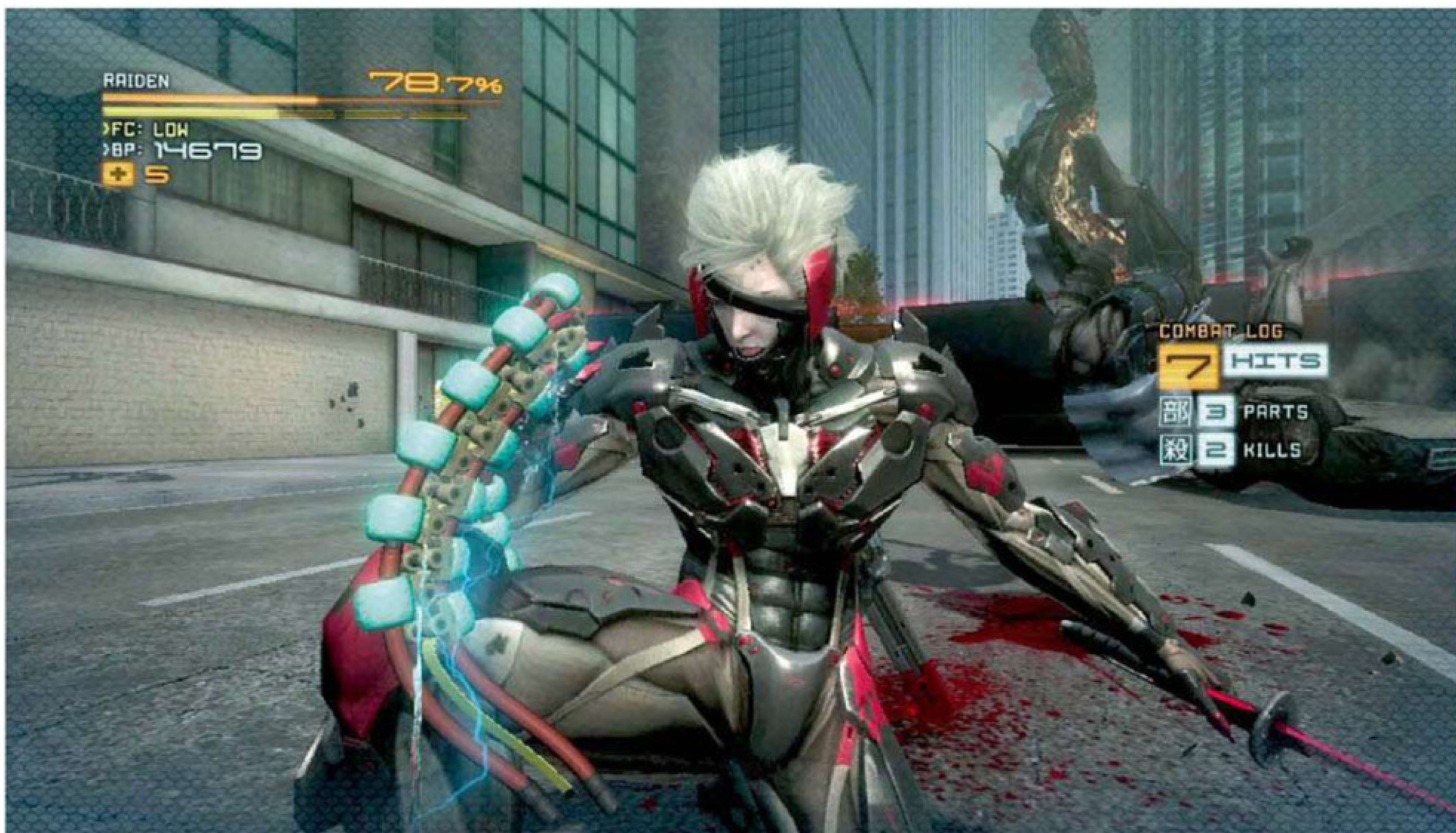




LEFT As is often the case in games like these, *Rising's* human enemies are the most fun to fight. Time your parry perfectly and a cyborg foe will be popped up into the air, opening up an optional juggle combo before Zandatsu.

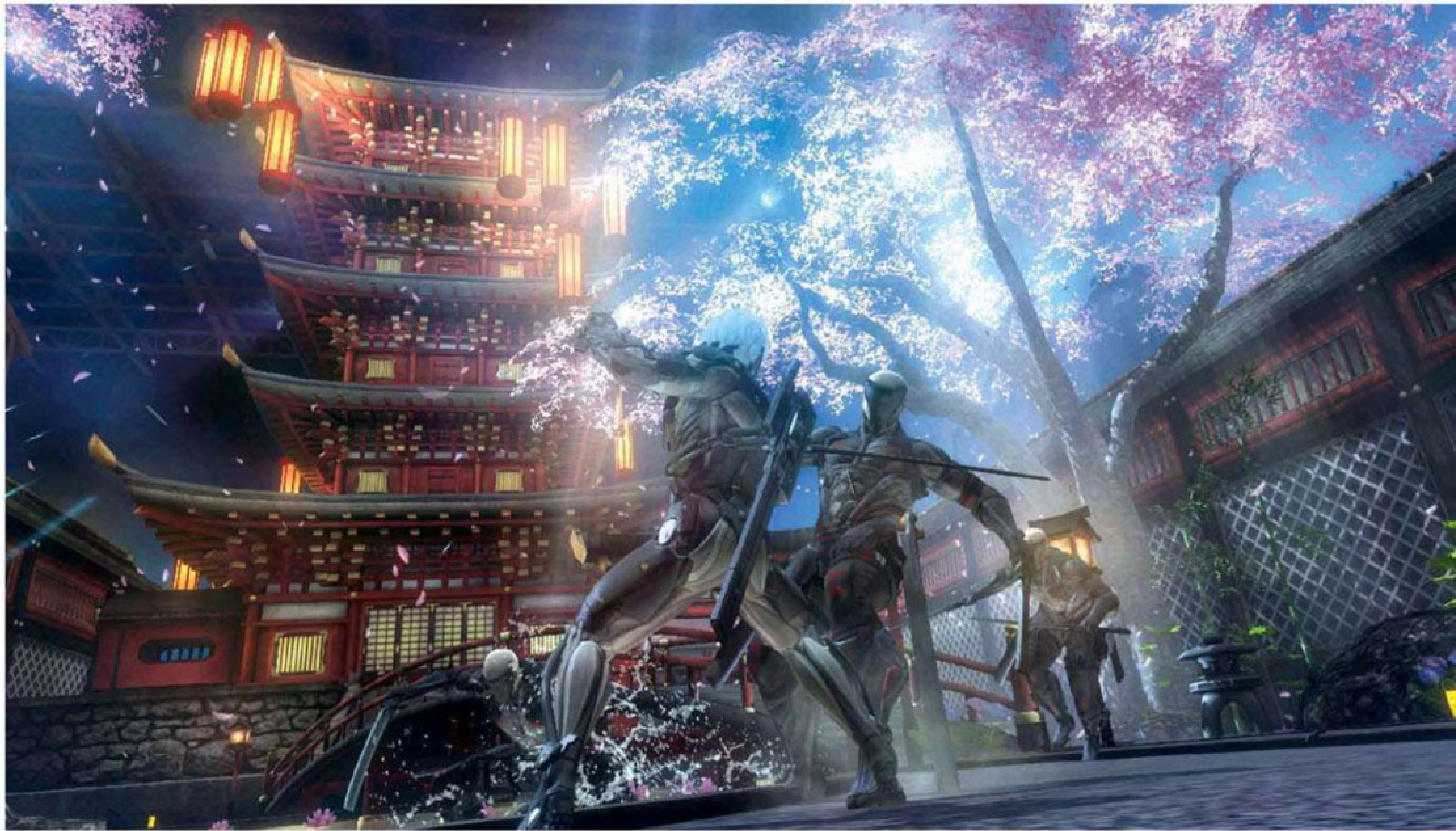
BELOW It's not just the human foes who have spines – almost every enemy in the game, bosses aside, has vertebrae ripe for the plucking. You'll need to dismember the bigger enemies first, though.

BOTTOM Some enemies' left hands can be lopped off and given to Doktor, the creator of Raiden's cyborg parts. The way the mechanic is introduced suggests it's central to the game's upgrade system, but the reality is quite different



RIGHT It wouldn't be a *Metal Gear* game without VR missions. There's replay value here, with objectives focusing on survival, stealth, traversal and specific weapons. More are planned as DLC

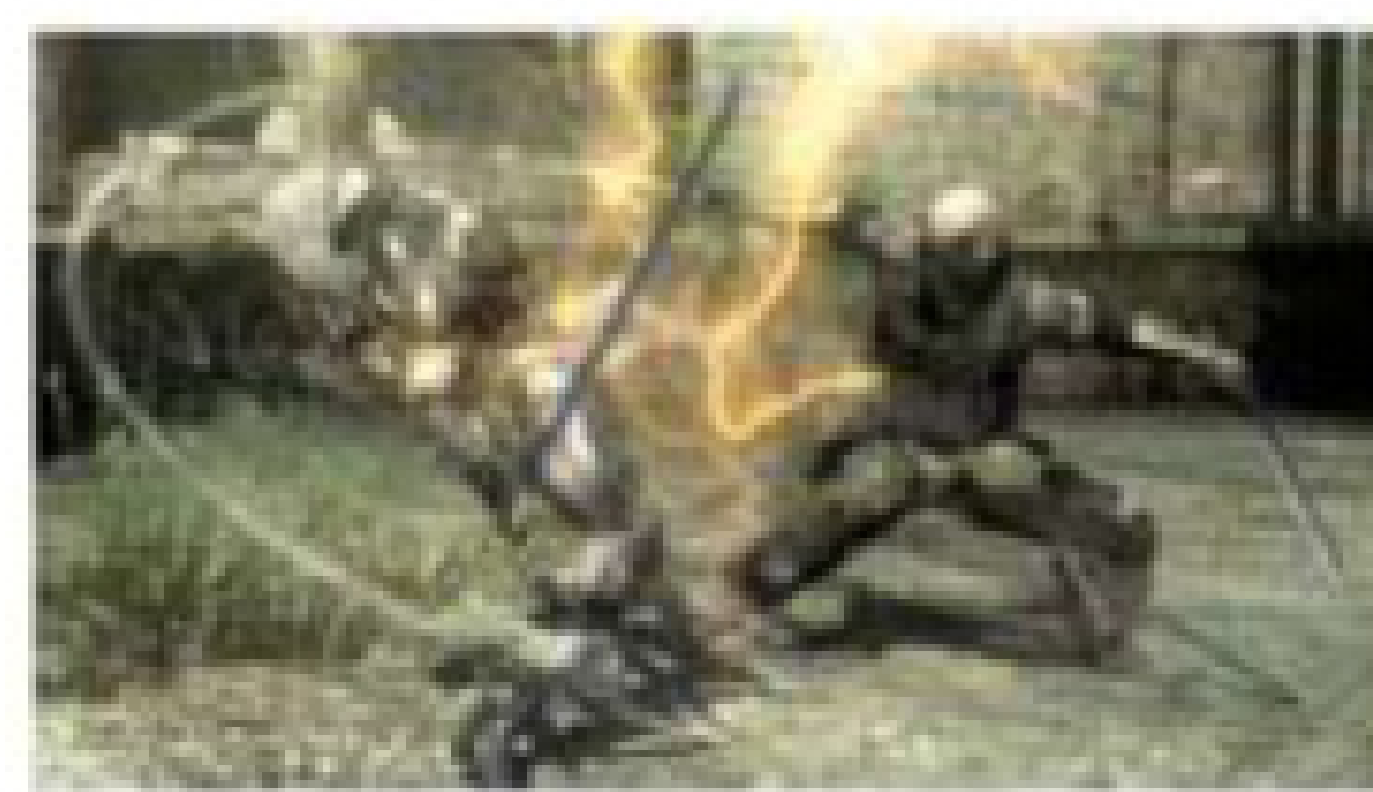




Indeed, but chapter five is merely chapter three in reverse. Chapter six is a boss fight. Chapter seven is three arenas and two bosses, and then the credits roll. While the game clock doesn't track cutscenes or retries, it does measure the countless *Gears Of War*-style slow-walk codec conversations, and by the end of our Normal playthrough it totalled just five and a half hours. After a Hard run in which we skipped all the codec sections, it read nine and a half. When the credits rolled on our Very Hard playthrough, we'd been playing for less than 15 hours. While we certainly didn't expect a 50-hour game, we were hoping for a little more meat under the exoskeleton than this.

Yes, you can add to your moveset, improve weapons and extend your life and FC bars by spending Battle Points accrued in-game, but we'd completed the Skills section of the Customise menu an hour into our second playthrough. There are only a handful of moves for the weapons you take from fallen bosses, and equipping them binds them to the Triangle button, taking the place of your regular heavy attack and stripping you of a good chunk of your normal moveset. You're thrown the occasional bone – a new costume, or a stat-boosting wig – but you have no idea when they're coming. There's nothing to work towards, nothing like the *Bayonetta* bracelet that you'd spend an entire playthrough saving up for.

And while *Rising's* core combat system is a delight, it's frequently undermined by the worst thirdperson camera we've seen in years. It's serviceable in more open areas, but it struggles to cope in the cramped confines of a sewer system, a nuclear facility or an office block. It's even worse on the higher difficulties, when you're frequently surrounded by three or more of



A CLOSE SHAVE

Raiden loses a fight (and an arm) in an early tussle with Desperado lieutenant Jetstream Sam. When Raiden reappears in chapter one, he's a face away from being as much a cyborg as those he spends the game slicing into tiny pieces, the only flesh on show running down from his hairline to his upper lip. Platinum is seemingly fascinated by Raiden's steel chin, and barely a cutscene goes by without a blade of some kind passing within millimetres of his jawline. Every single time, you expect a razor-related pun to follow, but it never comes.

ABOVE The ascent up Marshal World's headquarters drops you in this indoor Japanese garden, where *Rising* is at its prettiest. Look out for RPG-wielding cyborgs firing ordnance from the upper tiers, though

the larger enemies at once, where that beautiful parry system is compromised by a camera that keeps whirling around in a fruitless search for a clear shot of an out-of-sight Raiden. How do you tilt the joystick towards an opponent when you can't tell where towards is?

It means you're either going to mistime or misplace your attempted parries, and as such, you're going to take damage. Perhaps that's why Zandatsu refills your health, and why healing items are plentiful. They're used automatically, too – handy in the thick of battle, perhaps, but rather less so against multi-form bosses with checkpoints. You'll arrive at the boss with a full stock of healing items, fudge your way to its final form, die and have to take it down with a single health bar.

There are even balance issues. On the higher difficulties, the first chapter is comfortably the hardest, where the game bafflingly plays slave to the narrative and strips you of your extended health bar, extra moves and weapons, and doesn't give you a sniff of Zandatsu until it's formally introduced in the next chapter.

Platinum is a victim of its own success: its games will forever be compared to *Bayonetta*, and that's a standard few can match, although it's one to which the studio should always aspire. But while *Rising's* combat is hugely satisfying to experiment with, and a sight to behold when played well, it's undermined by technical issues and a singleplayer campaign that peters out just as you think it's getting going. There's replay value here, and for Platinum's most devoted fans it won't matter if the game is five or 50 hours long, but others will, rightly, feel a little short-changed.

Post Script

The evolutionary experiment that is Metal Gear Rising's parry

Credit where it's due: it takes guts to build an entire game around its parry. Before this, it has usually been an optional extra, designed as the preserve of the technically advanced player, following the logic that there are few more appealing concepts in all of martial arts than flooring an opponent by using their own forward momentum against them, turning defence into attack with minimal effort.

The most pivotal videogame parry of all before now surely belongs to *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike*. Look at what that did for the fighting game and it's easy to understand why Platinum has turned to the technique for its fourth thirdperson melee combat game in six and a half years in business. This is a more lenient implementation of the parry than *3rd Strike*'s, however, since Capcom's game asks you to tap the joystick towards your opponent at the moment of impact. If you're doing that, there's no way you're holding back to block. Get it wrong and you leave yourself wide open. It's high risk, sure, but in a game where openings are hard to come by and a single combo can wipe out half an opponent's life bar, it's high reward, too.

Platinum could never do that here (not on the default difficulty, at least). *Rising*'s a tough sell as it is: a game in a series whose name puts off as many as it attracts, and in a genre that's totally alien to the series' normal fanbase. Perhaps it could follow the lead of Team Ninja's Xbox classic and hardcore brawler poster boy *Ninja Gaiden* instead? In it, Tomonobu Itagaki's parry design has it so that you hold the block button, then tap a button at the moment an attack connects. It's smart design for a game in which you spend most of your time firmly on the back foot – and it's safe, too, because as long as you're holding block, there's no chance of attacking by accident – but overall it makes for an overtly defensive playstyle, albeit one punctuated with moments of explosive reprisal. The last time we saw Raiden, though, was in one of *Metal Gear Solid 4*'s most memorable cutscenes, where he sliced a streetful of Gekko walkers to ribbons in the blink of an eye. It wouldn't do to have him spend most of *Rising* standing stock still, waiting for his enemies to attack.

Rising's system is the logical extension of *Bayonetta*'s parry mechanic, the Moon Of Mahaa-Kalaa bracelet, one of several costly accessories tucked away in the game's shop and deliberately priced out of reach of most players on their first playthrough. It seems Hideki Kamiya wanted you to learn the ins and outs of the Witch Time dodge system first and foremost, and then the weaponset. Revisit *Bayonetta* now, put on the parry bracelet and you can see the seeds of *Rising*'s system. You can be a bit off with your timing, just as Raiden can, fending off the attack but gaining little, if any,

frame advantage in which to launch an attack of your own. Time it perfectly and you slip into Witch Time, the world coming to a standstill, your blows much more powerful. But where *Bayonetta* might finish up with a torture attack or Wicked Weave, for Raiden it's a well-placed slice to the torso and Zandatsu.

Raiden's parry draws on all these games, though. It offers reward on the scale of *3rd Strike* with the risk drastically reduced. It's *Ninja Gaiden*'s block button safety net without the overtly defensive mindset. It's *Bayonetta*'s parry bracelet, but it's the focus of the combat from the first encounter onwards, rather than an optional, late-game extra. It magpies from the games that have preceded it, but refines their elements to ensure it can serve as *Rising*'s most useful mechanic, one far more important than the marketable but far less rewarding Free Cutting. And if you still doubt whether the parry, not Blade mode, is the game's true focus, complete it three times and you'll unlock Revengeance difficulty, where a perfect parry is an instant kill.

It's telling that *Rising* is at its worst when the parry is compromised. The nimble Raptor Gears have a habit of hopping backwards after attacking, so your reprisal finds only thin air (though you'll soon learn to walk them into the corner first). Boss fights are inconsistent. Some attacks *have* to be parried, while others – the final boss is especially bad for this – can only ever be blocked, no matter how fine your timing.

And chances are that just about all the game's fist-pumping highs will follow a perfect parry. The one that knocks a 20-foot-high tank with missile launchers onto its robotic backside. The one against a cyborg with a parry of its own, setting in motion a beautiful back-and-forth – five in a row, two per side, your third breaking his guard and stunning him. The one that knocks three foes into the air, a single horizontal Blade mode swipe revealing three adjacent spines.

We rely on the best creators in their fields to play around with convention like this, even if the results aren't entirely successful. It's how Capcom managed to make fighting games feel fresh again after shipping more than a dozen *Street Fighters* in the space of a decade. It's why *Ninja Gaiden* is still held in the highest regard despite Team Ninja's slide into mediocrity. It's how Platinum, with both Capcom and Cover Studio in its DNA, built an action game not around combat, but evasion, and ended up making the best one we've ever played. *Rising* may not hit *Bayonetta*'s heights, but it shows that Platinum's relentless willingness to experiment remains intact, and that Inaba and co run their business the same way they structure their games: as a delicate balance of risk and reward. ■

We rely on the best creators to play around with convention like this, even if the results aren't entirely successful



Tomb Raider

Despite what you may have heard, Lara Croft doesn't need protecting. But it almost seems like she might during this ninth *Tomb Raider*'s opening moments. She has been shipwrecked and separated from her crew on an island in Japan's hostile Dragon's Triangle. She's hurt, hungry and clearly very scared. As the first of many animals roasts on the first of many campfires, she hugs herself tightly and shivers. Videogame heroes don't tend to do that.

This will all change in due course, admittedly. *Tomb Raider* is Lara's origin story, telling the tale of how she turned from a gap year adventurer into the globe-trotting PlayStation pin-up introduced almost 17 years ago. By the end, she's flinging herself across chasms with ease and stabbing aggressors in the eyes with arrows, leaving countless dead bodies in her wake. But for now, huddled tight against the cold as the rain tips down on Yamatai island, things are different.

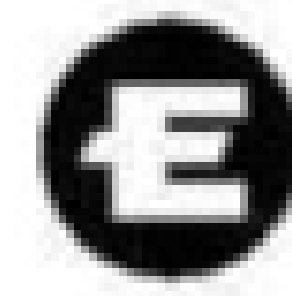
Lara's shipmates found Yamatai by flaunting accepted explorer wisdom at the insistence of our protagonist, causing them to stumble handily across it. It's a mythical place, the location of which real-world historians and archaeologists have debated for centuries, so plonking it in Japan's equivalent of the Bermuda Triangle makes not only narrative sense but for a fine videogame setting, too.

The brutal storms that bring in new arrivals and keep them here have weathered this landscape, and that it's frequently a beautiful place says a lot for the quality of the art direction. This is no shimmering paradise hiding a dark secret like *Far Cry 3* or *Lost*; this island wears its darkness on the outside. Heavy storms blacken the sky as an angry sea crashes endlessly against the shore. Mountains are intimidating, rocky and impassable. Foliage is lush, but never verdant. It's a dark, foreboding place, which makes the rare moments of beauty – the sun peeking through a blanket of cloud, a snowy climb up a radio tower – all the more striking.

Several centuries of inhabitants have left their mark, too. The mystical Queen Himiko's early followers built Nara-style temples in her honour that still stand today, while more recent occupants have made a rickety shantytown that's surprisingly industrialised. When stitched together by a smartly interwoven network of woodland, scalable rock and caverns, and combined with a changeable climate, there's a lot of environmental and architectural variety here for a single location.

This does much to address the Nolan North-voiced elephant in the room. *Uncharted* is an obvious influence, and one that Crystal Dynamics might feel is entirely justified given how Nathan Drake has appropriated Lara's globe-trotting, treasure-hunting ways. There are differences, though. While Naughty Dog's cheery protagonist jets from place to place, every few chapters dropping him in a fresh environment in some new far-

Publisher Square Enix
Developer Crystal Dynamics
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now



www.bit.ly/Wommao
Screenshot gallery

This is an open game, if not an open-world one, and exerts much less strenuous control over you than Drake's misadventures

flung corner of the globe, here there is only Yamatai. That *Tomb Raider* at times rivals *Uncharted* for variety and spectacle while having such a consistent sense of place is a true achievement.

There are moments, of course, when the camera takes absolute control, when the only time you break Lara's relentless forward momentum is to walk around an obstacle, clamber sideways to the next handhold, or pop in and out of cover to eliminate those who stand in your way. But this is an open game, if not an open-world one, and it exerts much less strenuous control over you than Drake's misadventures have to date.

Yamatai is broken up into hubs – the beach on which your ship is wrecked, the woodland where you first make camp, the shantytown – and the mountain paths and underground passages that run off them tend to loop back on themselves. You'll step into a mountainside crevice and emerge 20 minutes later overlooking the same area but 200 metres higher up, perhaps with a new tool or ability to open up new areas.

While *Uncharted* has only its main route and the occasional glinting treasure in your peripheral vision, here you're free to go off piste. OK, there's a golden path – sometimes literally, since a tap of LB activates your *Batman: Arkham Asylum*-like Survival Instinct, which highlights objects and objectives in the glittering colour – but distractions are plentiful. From one central platform you might spot three or four different routes, only one of which will trigger the next narrative beat. Another path might lead to a Hidden Tomb in need of raiding, although that's a misnomer: you're alerted to their proximity by a popup, and their entrances are clearly marked with hieroglyphic scrawls. Inside each, you'll find a single-room physics puzzle.

Completion of a tomb isn't rewarded with some rare treasure, but a gold chest containing a hefty XP bonus. Just about everything on Yamatai you can kill, solve or discover nets you XP; fill a progress bar and you'll be given a Skill Point to spend in one of three categories. Survivor gives you access to greater rewards when looting corpses, and makes the items dotted around the map easier to spot. Hunter increases your ammo capacity and unlocks close-range finishing moves. Brawler boosts health and opens up a series of powerful counterattacks with the weapons at your disposal.

One of the earliest skills you'll unlock increases the rate at which you acquire Salvage, the game's main collectible and secondary currency, which you use to improve Lara's weaponry. Her shotgun, pistol and rifle each have the usual upgrades to damage, recoil and ammo capacity, but the real star of the show is the bow she finds on a corpse in the game's opening minutes. It's by her side throughout, and is a handy metaphor for her gradual transformation. At the start of the game,





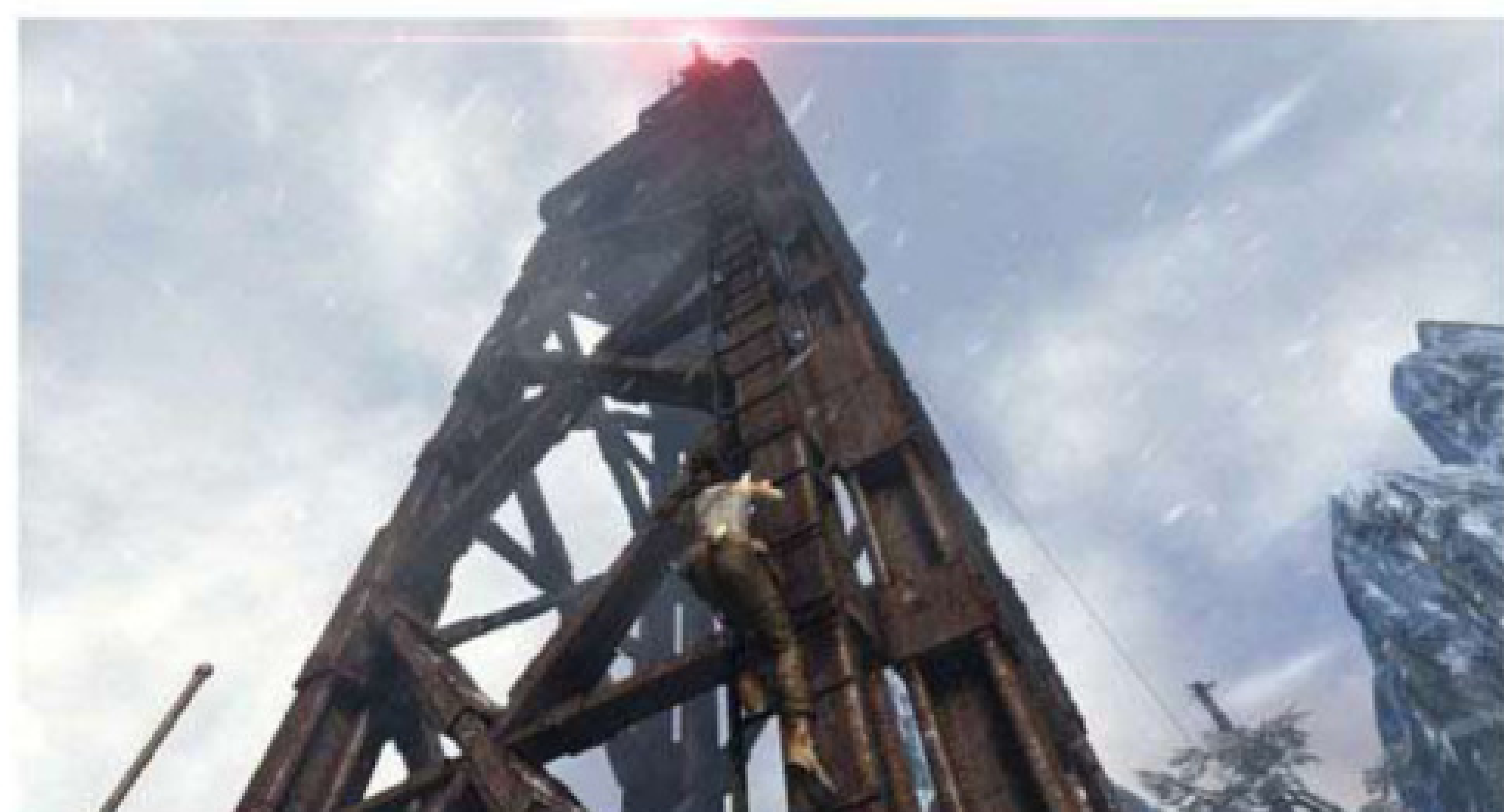
ABOVE The release dates are too close for it to be anything but coincidence, yet there's some connective tissue between *Tomb Raider* and *Far Cry 3*, including hunting, a satisfying bow, and rickety, creaking radio towers. **LEFT** While the island's inhabitants have helpfully set up ziplines, you'll soon need to make your own. An early upgrade to Lara's bow enables you to lodge line-carrying arrows in any object wound in rope



BELOW Camilla Luddington adds Lara Croft to a CV that includes a nanny in David Duchovny comedy *Californication* and, in a TV movie about the 2011 royal wedding, the *Duchess Of Cambridge*. She also performed Lara's motion capture



ABOVE Early on, your only option against a foe up close is to dodge to safety and attack with your bow or pistol. Work your way up the Brawler skill tree and you can follow that dodge with counters that kill instantly





it'll take down a single deer. By the end, you'll use it to fashion makeshift ziplines, pull down loose walls and manipulate heavy objects. It's also the clear weapon of choice in combat, not only for scoring silent headshots on distant foes, but up close, too. You can throttle enemies from behind with the bow's shaft, or stab them in the knee or eye with an arrow. There are fire arrows later on as well as grenade-tipped ones, and you'll quickly come to resent using the more traditional ordnance in your weaponset. Guns break your cover, of course, but more damagingly, they turn *Tomb Raider* into a lukewarm thirdperson shooter.

There's too much combat at times, though there is at least a little more narrative justification for Lara's homicidal tendencies than Drake's. She kills first to save herself from aggressors and then later — once she's learned more about the all-male cult that occupies Yamatai in apparent service to the spirit of Queen Himiko — to save her friends. There's a telling exchange with Roth, a shipmate and something of a mentor to our adventurer-to-be, early on. "That can't have been easy," he says when a tearful Lara tells him she's killed a few of the men who just attacked their party. "It's scary," she replies, "just how easy it was."

It gets easier: enemies put up a fight, but the odds always seem stacked in your favour, at least on the default difficulty. A spot of gentle stealth will see you take out a few, and you've got so many tools at your disposal — three guns and a bow, dodges, counters and finishing moves, and countless exploding barrels — that failure is, for the most part, barely an option. Platforming is fluid, *Uncharted*-sticky and largely stress free. There are some excellent deaths in store for Ms



PRIVACY RAIDER

While *Salvage* is the most common collectible, you'll also find Relics left behind by previous generations of inhabitants, from ancient Chinese vases to WWII-era stuffed toys. These aren't just discovered and then stowed away: Lara examines them and explains their significance, and some can be closely inspected for further details. Journals dotted about the place do the same job, though some are left behind by Lara's shipmates, fleshing out various character backstories and relationships. One late encounter is rendered especially poignant by a journal entry that we suspect many players will miss. Lara will risk life and limb to save you, then, but she's not above reading your diary while she's at it.

ABOVE The rifle is a weedy thing with slightly too much recoil. There's little incentive to use it, even when it's upgraded. The bow is a quicker kill from traditional rifle range, with the added benefit of being silent

Croft, though. One grisly end that comes courtesy of a tree branch is a particular highlight, with Lara looking shocked, offended even, before the light disappears from her eyes. And the relative lack of difficulty works in the context of the story of how Lara Croft transformed from precocious young thrillseeker to arse-kicking raider of tombs. If there's one significant shift, it's that the original game's platforming was precise and its combat was automated. Here, it's the other way around, but that's more a reflection of the times.

So, in fact, is the game as a whole. It's been more than four years since *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, and Lara has watched from the sidelines as this generation has defined itself. In many ways, *Tomb Raider* can be seen as a sort of collage of design best practice, or as a collection of the generation's greatest hits. It's got the kill-confirming XP popup of *Call Of Duty*; the gentle, optional stealth of an *Assassin's Creed*; and *Batman's* Detective mode. It's got the linear, cinematic spectacle of *Uncharted*, with the narrative fleshed out by audiologs borrowed from *BioShock*. Platforming is Drake by way of Ezio Auditore, and combat borrows from, well, take your pick. Yet despite all this, *Tomb Raider* retains its own identity, and much of that is down to its British heroine. Whether she's huddled up against the cold or sending five men to their doom with an explosive arrow, this is still Lara Croft, one of gaming's most distinctive heroes — and now she has a personality that extends far beyond the bounds of her bra straps. If the purpose of a reboot is to redefine a character and set them up for the future, then this is a job well done.

Post Script

Interview: **Rhianna Pratchett**, lead writer

Rhianna Pratchett – the daughter of Discworld author Sir Terry – is a writer with a videogame CV that includes *Heavenly Sword*, *Mirror's Edge*, and the *Overlord* series. She was announced as *Tomb Raider*'s lead writer last July, a month after executive producer Ron Rosenberg said players would want to protect the new-look Lara. Here, she reflects on the challenges of rebooting a gaming icon.

At what point in development did you join the team?

People are used to seeing writers on films as they get announced; that's just how film works. With games, the PR ramp up is so long they need those announcements. I'd been on the project for about two and a half years. [Laughs] I think I came in somewhere between a year and a year and a half into development. There was a synopsis, there were bios for a few of the characters, and that's what I started off working with.

How many of the characters were sketched out at that point?

Lara and Roth were definitely there, the core four survivors – Reyes, Alex, Grimm and Jonah – were there, but as characters they went through a lot of changes. We had small bios, but they were expanded on and changed. I wrote a lot of backstory for them, [and] relationship webs about how they interact with the other characters. Whitman [a celebrity archaeologist and leader of the expedition] wasn't in there originally. He was used to create conflict between other characters, which, obviously, is central to writing. He became a lot of fun to write, actually. I really like his scenes with Lara and the actor brought a lot to the character.

The infamous interview claim that players would want to protect Lara was always nonsense, wasn't it? She spends most of the game saving people.

Well, I'm not entirely sure what the thinking was behind that. It was an interview line, and I believe it has something to do with some information that had come out of internal game testing. I'm not going to say that some players *don't* feel that towards the character, but personally, I inhabit a character. Whether they're Lara Croft, or Raz from *Psychonauts*, or whatever, I *am* that character. For me, it's not about protection. It's about self-preservation.

It was unfortunate wording. To be fair, Ron didn't ever say, 'We put this scene in because players feel this way about Lara,' but everyone linked that together. There were so few journalists that had played that scene in context at the time that everyone was giving opinions on other people's opinions, not having played it. But I think the debate that came out of it was valuable.



"I think it's all important debate that's going on. I wish people had waited for context before they judged"



The way that we speak about the relationship between player and character, the way we feel about female characters: I think it's all important debate that's going on. I wish people had waited for context before they judged why things had been done.

Your prior work – *Heavenly Sword*, *Mirror's Edge* – has been on new characters, on blank slates. What was it like writing someone so established?

It was actually similar to writing for new IP in some ways. We were rebooting Lara, picking and choosing what we wanted to out of her history; we were sort of reinventing her. I came to the project with my own ideas, and Crystal had their own, and they gelled quite nicely... We still paid attention to the things that had gone before, but we didn't feel beholden to them.

It's a complex history, isn't it? There are different interpretations of what happened to her parents.

Her parents are missing, presumed dead. There are a couple of moments where Lara references her father, but it wasn't a big thing for this story, so we've not gone into it in any detail. It's amazing how many fans get quite obsessed about Lara's [parentage]. There's one in particular who's practically demanding to see copies of Lara's parents' birth certificates. He's convinced that if her parents weren't born in Britain then she isn't British. I think he thought we were secretly trying to make Lara American...

There's some important character development work in the audio logs. How do you decide what stays in the main narrative and what goes elsewhere?

John Stafford, who's the audio designer, did a lot of the audio diaries and Lara's on-the-fly dialogue. They were based on the character profiles, their backstories and relationships. We both had a good sense of the characters; I would look over secondary narrative, and he would feed back on the script. It helps fulfil the types of player out there, I think. It allows you to unfold the story in line with the way a player plays, and use secondary narrative as a reward for exploring the world.

Where next for Lara? You can't do two reboots in a row and she's powerful now.

We're going to have to find new tricks to play, I guess. Obviously I've not been involved in it, but people will have been thinking about what comes next, if there will be a next game and what's going to happen with that. A lot of that's going to depend on how this one does, to be honest. I'm sure there's people at Crystal working on this kind of thing, but if I am involved in anything it won't be until later on. ■

Crysis 3

Gearbox might have failed to reshape *Aliens* into an engaging videogame, but Crytek's had better luck with *Predator* over the years. The *Crysis* series has always been enthralled by John McTiernan's film, with the jungle-to-urban switch in *Crysis 2* mimicking its inspiration's own trajectory. Here the debt is paid. Your bow, a bit of hi-tech yet primitivistic weaponry, shares its name with McTiernan's alien.

And the *Predator* bow plays a crucial role in *Crysis 3*'s standout multiplayer mode, which itself recalls Arnie's struggle in the jungle. *Hunters* is an asymmetric gametype that sees cloaked, bow-wielding assassins whittling down a group of heavily armed mercs. The mercenaries have proximity trackers and conventional arms, but the assassins enjoy one-hit kills and near-invisibility, and any unfortunate they slay is compelled to join their ranks. It's a paranoid game of invisible cat and gun-toting mice, where a tightly knit huddle of mercenaries can be scattered by the merest ripple of active camo in the burnt-out buildings above them.

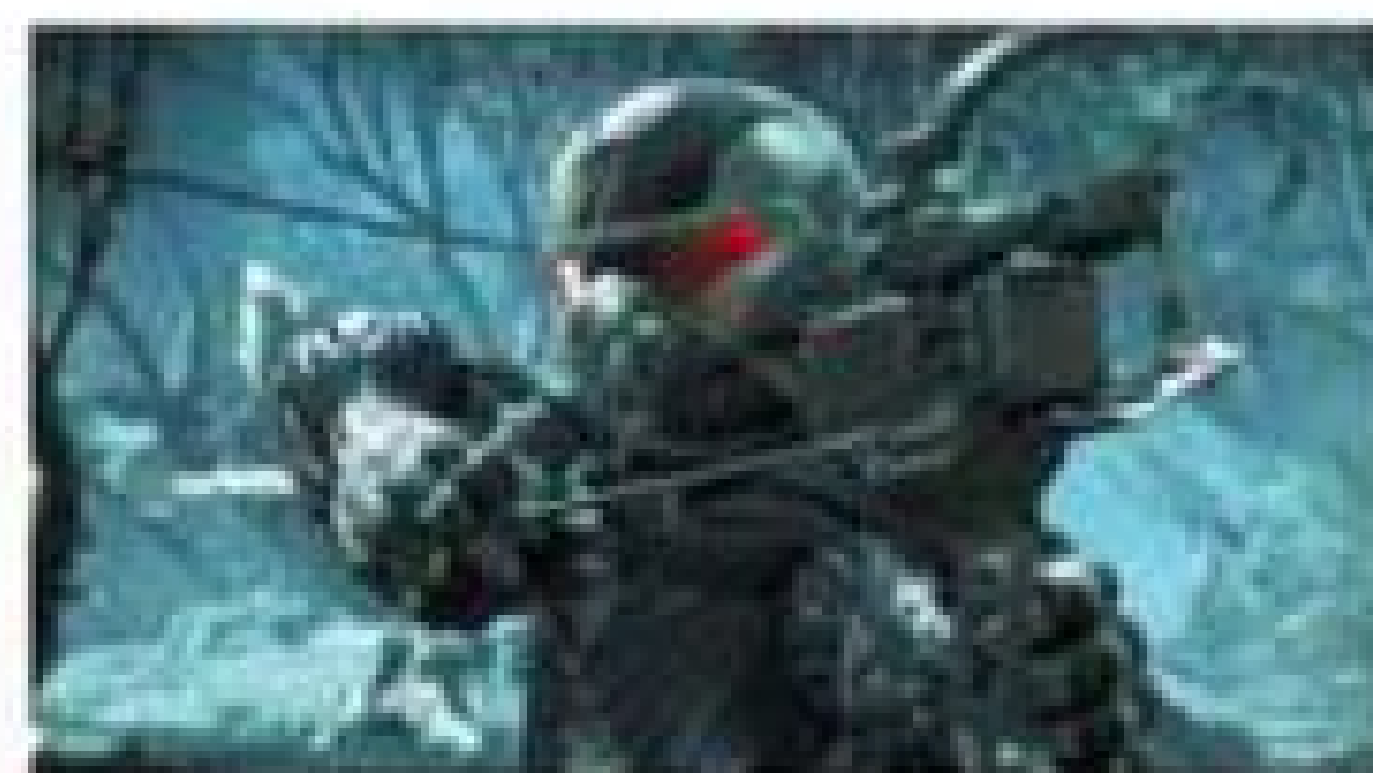
It's the highlight of a multiplayer mode that has clearly learned important lessons from *Crysis 2*. Players have an auto-armour perk equipped by default now, which ensures that the Nanosuit's defensive capabilities automatically engage when under fire. It's a neat way of slowly introducing those more used to Mjolnir armour to Crytek's skintight, manually operated alternative. The same goes for the fizzling pop of a Nanosuit with depleted armour reserves. Toggling the suit's crystalline defences on and off has always been key to combat, but there's a clarity to its importance and functionality now that makes for more readable and prolonged encounters.

But the real reason that *Hunters* mode works is because it mostly does away with such concerns, taking *Crysis*'s bulging utility belt's worth of weapons, tools, suit modes and tactical options, and rigidly dividing them up among participants. From that inflexible rationing emerges a clearly defined gametype, one in which both sides are aware of the other's limits and capabilities. *Hunters* is also the antidote to *Crysis 3*'s singleplayer campaign, which is crippled by the freedom that it generously offers players.

Self-sabotaging feature-creep means that in addition to the Nanosuit's cloak, Armour mode and various athletic tricks, *Crysis 3* reintroduces alien weaponry, gives Prophet the ability to hack and subvert turrets, and hands him the *Predator* bow. There's a game in that bow, with its satisfying thwack and various ammo types, but that game isn't *Crysis 3*, which renders its signature tool irrelevant by not once contriving a scenario or enemy type in need of some Robin Hood-style perforation. This problem surfaces repeatedly across the breadth of Prophet's skillset, stuffed as it is with options that aren't exactly useless, but that lack purpose. The extent to which Prophet can customise his

Publisher EA
Developer Crytek
Format PC, 360 (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

Crysis 3 gives players a jangling bunch of keys, but provides a dearth of locks to open with them



TROOPER

We feel sorry for Prophet, the *Crysis* series' gruff lead. On the surface, he's not too dissimilar to Master Chief. Both are supersoldiers who've traded their humanity for battle armour and superpowers. But Prophet lacks the awed reverence of *Halo*'s marines, an ego-affirming backdrop to the series that constantly reminds players that Spartans are symbols as much as soldiers. Prophet is also in desperate need of a Cortana, a genuine companion with whom he can share more than gravelly-voiced affirmations and battle plans, and who can give players a little more richness of character to care about than just another juiced-up marine.

weaponry borders on absurdity – altering even the draw speed and tension on his bow – given the lack of a reason to do so. *Crysis 3* gives players a jangling bunch of keys, but provides a dearth of locks to open with them. “It’s up to you”, Prophet’s cockney companion frequently reminds you when it’s time to decide how you’ll approach any given encounter. But such freedom feels hollow when any old approach will do.

What’s worse, the game’s level design mirrors this problem of bloat without function. The first *Crysis* had maps that were genuine sandboxes, and the second offered tighter bubbles of open-ended gunplay. *Crysis 3* has negotiated an awkward truce between the two, expanding its action bubbles, but refusing to allow you to escape them. What this means is a great deal of redundant space padding out the same style of arena as seen in *Crysis 2*. The first game’s scale worked because players could get lost in it. You can’t escape *Crysis 3*’s encounters, you simply skulk and scabble at their edges like a spider in a bathtub before giving in and following that checkpoint indicator down the drain.

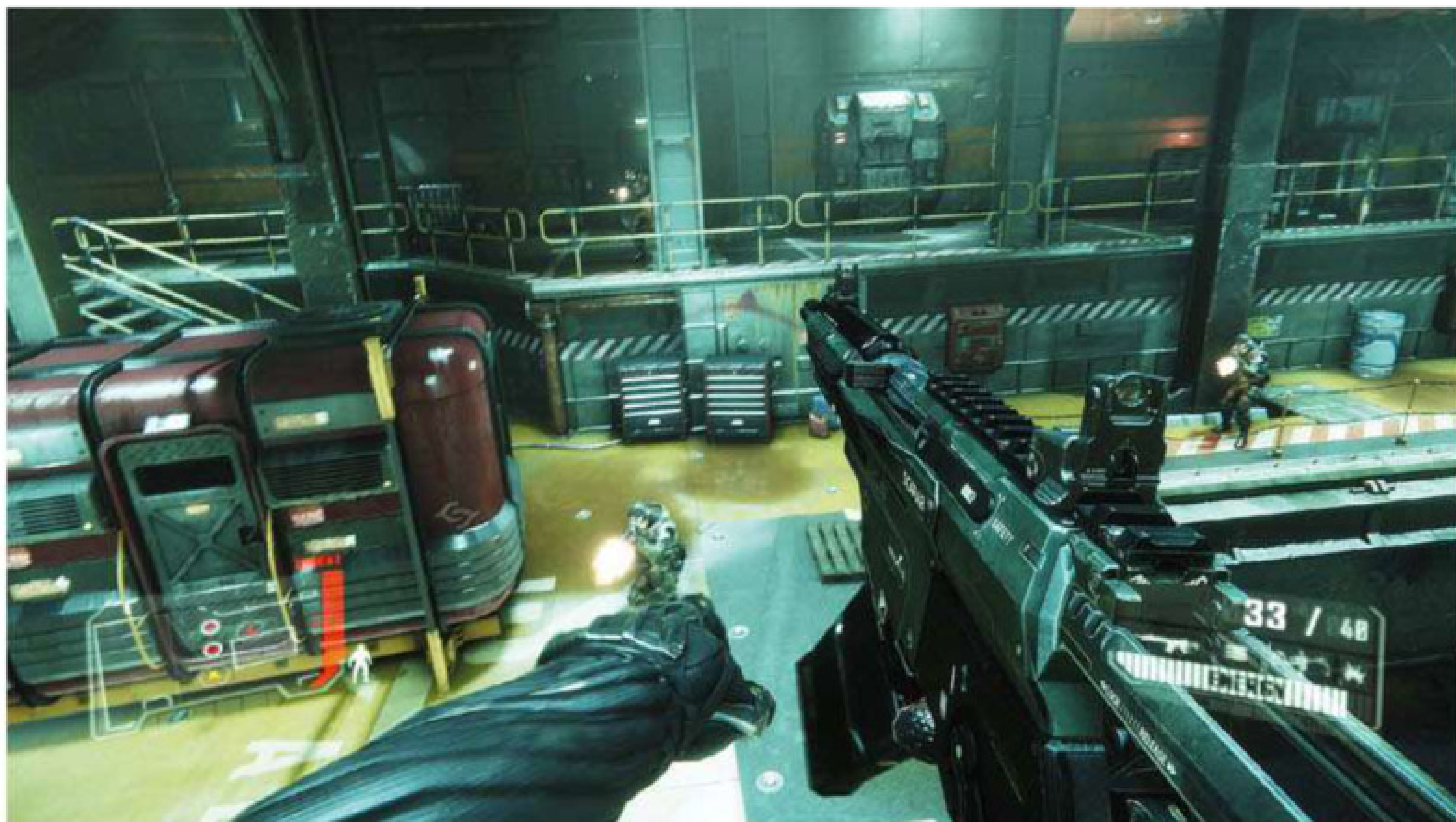
Levels boast more visual depth, at least, with *Crysis 3*’s lush rainforest roughing up the second game’s city-planned straight lines. But as striking as Crytek’s vibrant post-disaster New York is, the setting is wasted. Prophet’s movements through it lack direction, with loading screens teleporting him around the Nanodome in service of a derivative, portentous story in a way that undermines any sense of a journey through a coherent space. There’s a series of imaginative, evocative settings here – a financial district transformed into a towering hydroelectric dam, say, or Chinatown-cum-swampland – but playing through them is like flicking through concept art. They simply don’t exist as part of a thought-out, directed whole. This is all more the surprising considering *Crysis 3*’s modest length in comparison with its immediate predecessor. There’s about five hours of game here, a length that, even without *Call Of Duty*’s linear rails, should really be able to sustain a stronger sense of pacing than this.

It looks beautiful, of course. Everybody knows Crytek can work magic on a gaming PC, but it’s the Faustian pact that the studio has presumably entered into in order to conjure such imagery from consoles (while avoiding *Far Cry 3* levels of performance) that has us concerned. What was lost along the way? The first game’s soul was traded away by *Crysis 2*, but at least that game was aware of its limits, using its new walls to guide players through a series of emergent, reactive encounters. *Crysis 3* has neither direction nor freedom, though it does have human weapons, alien weapons, a cloaking device, an Armour mode, and a bow. And with this many options at your disposal, *Crysis 3* insists, surely you must be having fun.

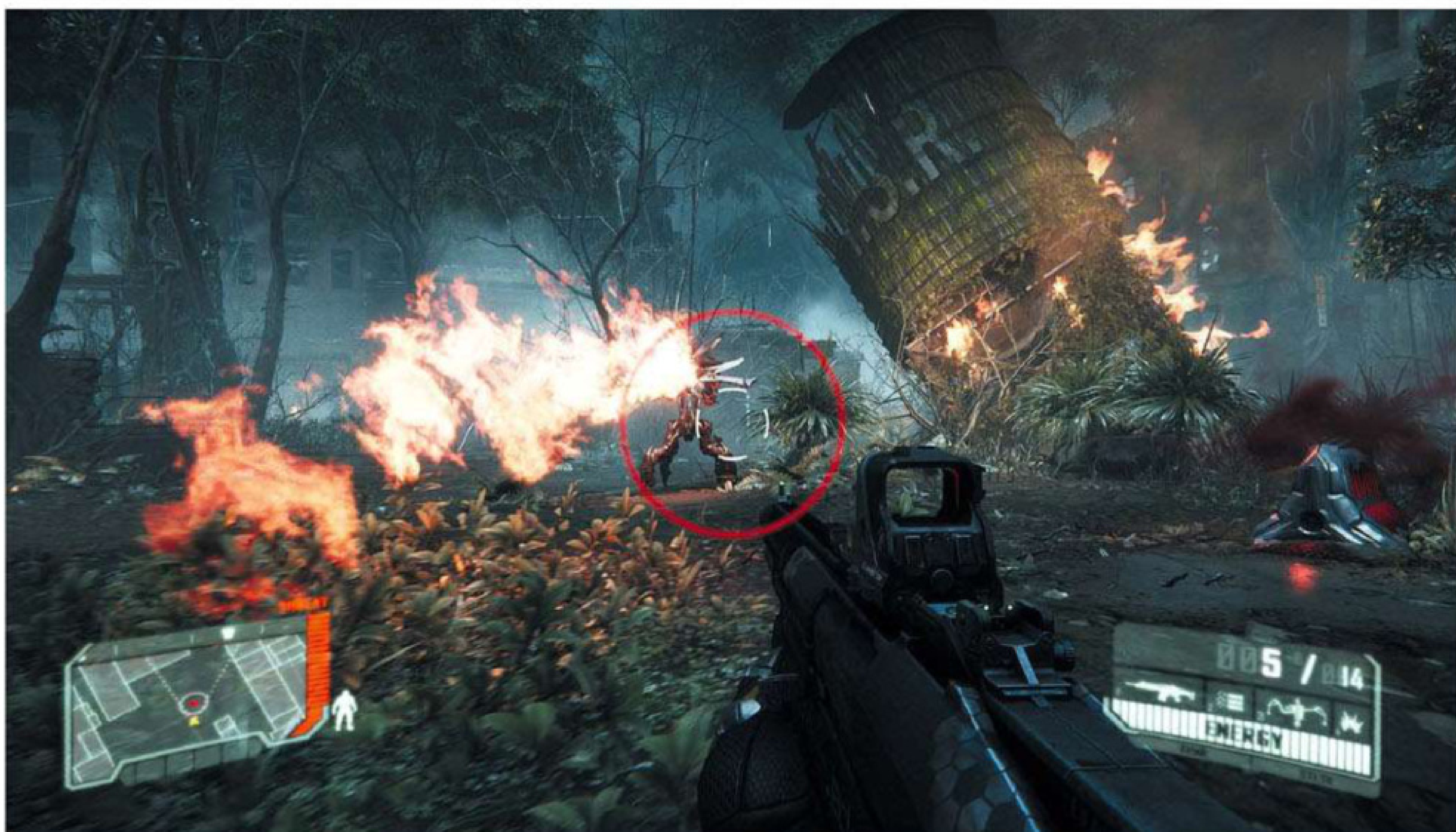


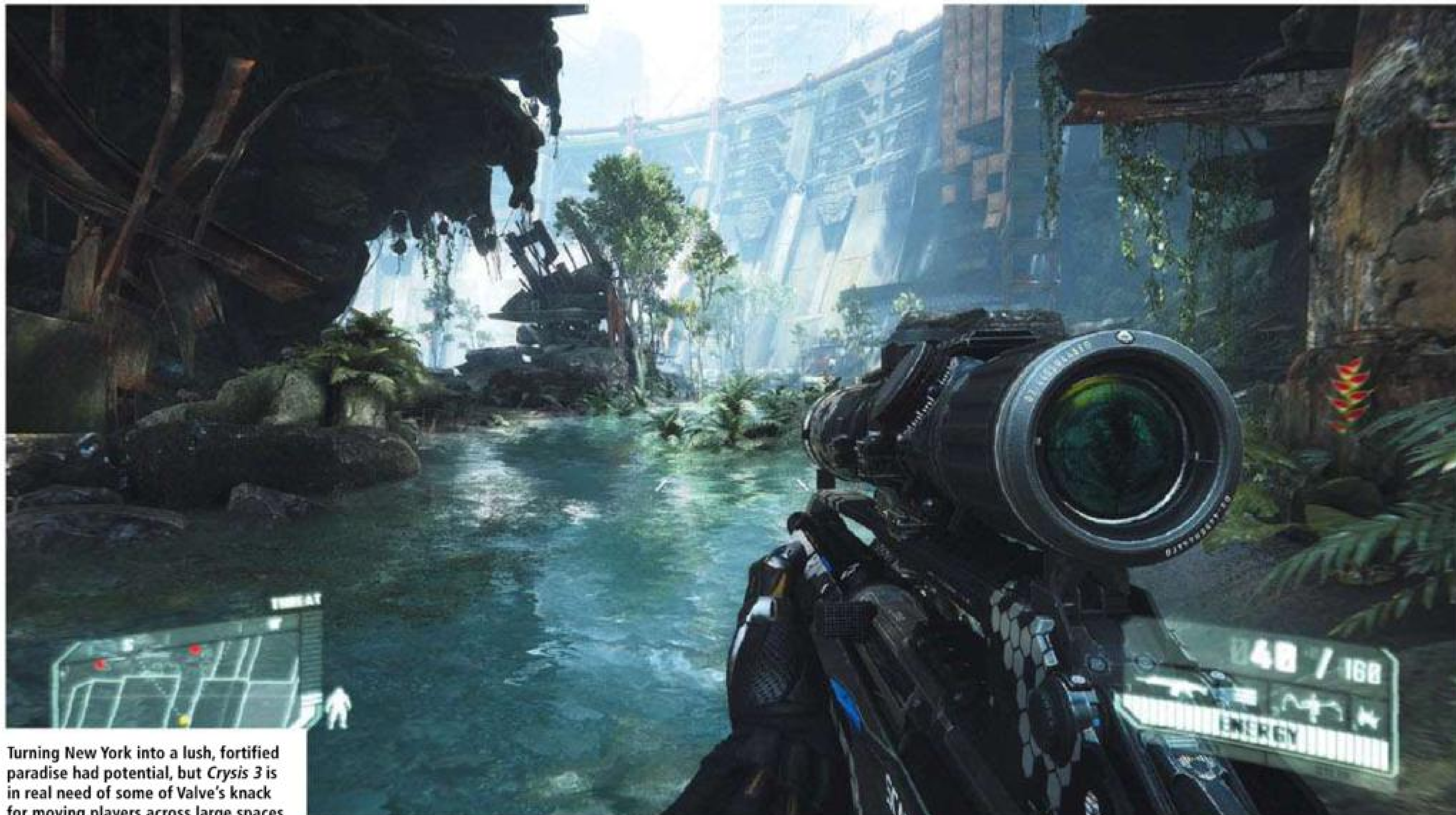
LEFT A vehicle turns up just in the nick of time during one time-limited race to a checkpoint. It hurtles along at a rattling pace, but since they only appear in the levels built for them, vehicles aren't quite the toys they were in the past

ABOVE There's a variety of tools for taking out airborne foes. While an explosive-tipped arrow is perhaps the most heroic way of dealing with an alien dropship, Prophet is able to carry explosive munitions, such as this rocket launcher, alongside his primary weapons.
RIGHT The game's opening level feels more *COD* than *Crysis*, with a soaking wet escape from a cargo ship that – spectacular Crytek visuals aside – is a dead ringer for the prologue of *Modern Warfare*. It's by far the game's most enclosed level, offering few of its later opportunities to experiment



BELOW Scorchers are one of the relatively few new enemies *Crysis 3* introduces. Unlike other Ceph troops, they can be hacked. Doing so temporarily paralyses them, leaving them open to attack





Turning New York into a lush, fortified paradise had potential, but *Crysis 3* is in real need of some of Valve's knack for moving players across large spaces

Post Script

Three games, three approaches to level design, but how do they affect play?

With the Nanosuit's Armor mode situated on the left bumper and its active camouflage on the right, *Crysis 3* can be an all-out shooter or a cautious stealth game, and can even oscillate between the two states. But don't let the symmetry of your gamepad fool you: your right index finger is the key to having fun with this game.

The Predator Bow might be undermined by a paucity of specific uses for it, but it's a tool designed to empower stealthier players. Letting an arrow fly doesn't break your cloak, which means Prophet can creep through maps limited only by his suit's energy reserves, killing CELL operatives and Ceph forces alike, and decloaking behind cover to recharge.

This is how we like to play *Crysis*. It's a style of play that captures those Predator influences most clearly, and one that the first game and its expansion, *Warhead*, easily allowed with their sprawling rainforests. We like to clear out enemy encampments cleanly – a hi-tech ghost flitting between cover and using nothing more messy than a silenced headshot when executing targets. But it's an approach often doomed to failure, usually descending into the indignity of a shootout. That said, the first game let us indulge our perfectionist streak organically thanks to its sprawling forest, where putting a couple of

acres between ourselves and the hornet's nest of troopers we'd stirred up was as effective as reverting to a loading screen. We'd disappear into the trees, select a new angle of attack and emerge again to catch our quarry unaware.

Crysis 2's level design meant there was no escaping our failures, so we either restarted, rushed our way to the next bubble, or resigned ourselves to picking off the remaining guards in a semi-alerted state while they hunted us. It brought out an obsessive streak: our stealthy attempts to pick through each of its checkpoints were riddled with restarts, because our need for ninja-like perfection meant we'd write off a failed attempt and revert to the last save.

Crysis 3 seems like it should offer an improvement on its predecessor, with levels large enough for you to leave combat behind while preparing for a second pass. In practice, you'll find these spaces just aren't built for retreat. Objectives are nestled at the top of towers, which can be approached from multiple angles but assaulted only from one, or buried within structures accessible only through player-funnelling corridors.

It's enough to make us reevaluate what at first seemed like a lazy choice of setting in *Far Cry 3*, one picked – as Ubisoft itself has claimed – because it provided an appropriate

backdrop for a story concerned with what happens when a nice young man is handed some guns and cut off from the humanising effects of civilisation. But what else does that separation bring? Room to manoeuvre.

There's something perfect about an island setting in an open-world game, because it can offer kernels of emergent combat wrapped up in a natural, organic buffer. *Far Cry 3*'s outposts, *Crysis*'s slightly larger fortifications: both are open-plan, lightly fortified defences of dubious tactical importance, but perfectly situated to make sport for a sniper on the undulating hills nearby. Subsequent *Crysis* games have butted up against what Ubisoft's designers took for granted: in a game that's predicated on freedom, players want to escape the strictures of the urban environment, with its walls, corridors and concrete encasements.

Crytek spent the preview stage of *Crysis 3* skirting around the issue of *Crysis 2*'s shift to semi-open design being necessitated by the 360 and PS3's limitations, and it will be interesting to see whether a new console generation offers the studio a chance to return to an open world. Because what else can the creeping vines, lush foliage and tree trunks bursting from the walls of New York's tenement buildings in *Crysis 3* be viewed as but an admission of a mistake? ■

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Aliens: Colonial Marines

As a series consisting of two excellent films followed by a growing counterweight of bad – or at least divisive – ones, the wider world of Alien could really use a break. As such, Gearbox's *Aliens: Colonial Marines* has been pitched as a corrective, using the smart, muscular intensity of Aliens (which had the original tag line of "This time it's war") to build a new narrative branching away from James Cameron's film, one that's not mired in the inexplicable non-drama of Alien 3's off-world prison or the faraway weightlessness of Resurrection. The violence and swagger of the Colonial Marines are the feature attractions here, and to solve the problem of the ones we knew having been eviscerated by the time that Aliens was done, the developer invents a second unit of grunts to investigate what happened to the first.

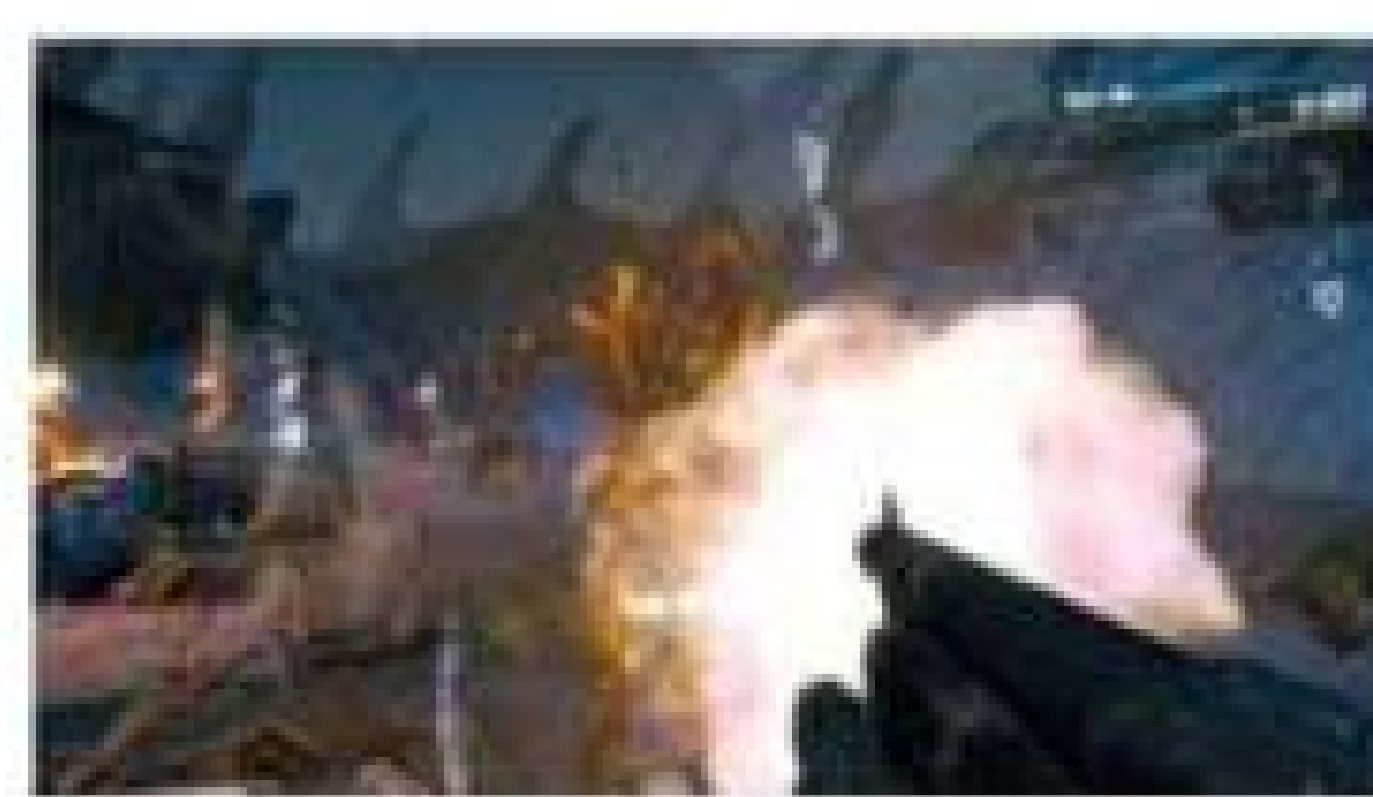
The problem is that right from the start this makes the game feel more like a copy than a continuation. The new marine ship, the Sephora, is the double of the original Sulaco, and the shorthand images used to introduce the group – emerging from cryosleep, being briefed on a cold metal deck, a female pilot wearing aviators at the controls of a dropship – are all doubles too. This isn't in the mould of Cameron's film, it's in thrall to it, right down to the roughneck dialogue and even the ship's android, Rook, the twin of Lance Henriksen's Bishop. As attractive as the availability of the star for the part must have been, a look to Prometheus would have shown the possibilities of introducing a new android character to the series.

So we are dealing with a facsimile, but on the surface at least, a good one. The Aliens aesthetic – still striking after all these years – is reproduced faithfully, going far beyond the improvised battlefield industrialism of the marines, with their rigged shoulder lights and harnessed smartguns. The deserted Sulaco, now infested with aliens and soon investigated by our new squad of bluff badasses, is just as Cameron left it, lit like a woozy disco of spinning orange hazard lights and echoing with deep, distant alarms. Piercing this anxious bass line is a set of occasional but distinctive noises – the reluctant hum of opening doors, the stutter of pulse rifles, and the whine of motion trackers.

Sadly, this is just a well-decorated shell, and nothing underneath suggests an understanding of why the films are so effective. It seems unfair, for instance, that the motion tracker, which has been borrowed by any number of firstperson shooters, should serve other games better than this one. But the implementation here is mysteriously clumsy: switching between the tracker and your weapons is so fast that there's no real cost to having the device up all the time, and even when it's stashed out of view it still warns of nearby aliens by emitting a single ping. In short, rather than enhancing the tension, it kills it. The tracker is so widely copied

Publisher Sega
Developer Gearbox Software
Format 360, PC, PS3 (version tested),
 Wii U
Release Out now, TBC (Wii U)

It is just a well-decorated shell, and nothing underneath suggests an understanding of why the films are so effective



MEANS OF ESCAPE

While *Colonial Marines* generally fails in its attempt to capture the spirit of Aliens, one of its multiplayer modes shows how it might be done. The deathmatch is unremarkable, but Escape, a *Left 4 Dead*-style evacuation dash in which marines can be downed, revived and respawned at checkpoints, does a great job of recreating the panic of the film's "They're coming out of the walls" moments. It's all thanks to scrambled teamwork and the increased threat of the aliens in human hands. If only the bold decision had been taken to make this the central premise.

because it should be both functional and dramatic, but here it's neither.

Colonial Marines also introduces human opponents early on in the form of a private army for the series' shady puppeteers, the Weyland-Yutani corporation. This niggles as a story inconsistency, since the evidence in Aliens is that the Colonial Marines *are* the corporation's private army, but more dispiritingly pitches the game into bland pop-and-cover generic action. Gameplay-wise, they are an unremarkable makeweight, and as an addition they seem out of place. They're inspired not so much by the films – which are about mankind encountering something purely alien, not itself in an opposing uniform – as by the need to give us a break from the monotony of killing aliens.

The representation of the xenomorphs is the game's most damaging failure. They're just not dangerous enough, reduced by a first mission deluge into a swarm of targets bearing the shape of a familiar, once-horrific symbol of death. But they have none of that pop icon's grace or deadliness. Their animation is occasionally staccato and their behaviour given to AI meanderings, leaving idiot aggression where there should be a fearsome singularity of purpose. There is no respect for the creature.

Colonial Marines' release date falling so soon after *Dead Space 3* – the latest in a series that has cribbed liberally from the Alien source material – brings this problem into sharp focus. Historically, *Dead Space* has solved the conundrum of requiring both abundance and lethality from its enemies by making each encounter with its necromorphs potentially fatal, but providing a nuanced set of tools to subdue and destroy them. *Colonial Marines* plays more like dousing a fire, your persistent spray of ammo directed inarticulately at a steady flow of enemies crawling out of the scenery.

In its central exercise of man versus alien, *Colonial Marines* feels stiff, shallow and dated. First announced for a 2008 release before the Aliens franchise machine prioritised other projects, it feels like more work has been retained from that initial production period than either Gearbox or Sega would care to admit. The saying that follows fiascos around Hollywood is that nobody sets out to make a bad film; collaborations sour, commercial realities dawn, and sometimes, as seems to be the case with *Colonial Marines*, time simply passes. While the intentions of all concerned have no doubt been pure – Gearbox in its aim to create a true sequel to Cameron's punchy action hit, and 20th Century Fox in giving the developer a green light to tinker with the central thread of a billion-dollar film series – the final result is a familiar mismanagement of a rich and potent set of ideas and images. They deserve brighter and more sensitive custodianship than this.



ABOVE *Colonial Marines'* unconvincing story isn't helped by some creaking dialogue delivery, with the speaker often being so quiet and physically undemonstrative that key information can drift by you unnoticed



TOP You can take control of xenomorphs in the game's asymmetric multiplayer. It brings the ability to scuttle along walls and ceilings, but the workmanlike handling never captures the elegance of the aliens' movement.
ABOVE There are three basic strains of alien. Soldiers, as seen in Cameron's film, make up the bulk of the infestation, joined by faster, more menacing Lurkers, and Spitters, who fire balls of acid and explode occasionally (that's an evolutionary plateau right there).
LEFT *Colonial Marines* is littered with references to the *Alien* films in the form of dog tags, character weapons and, at one point, the discarded legs of the Sulaco's unfortunate android, Bishop

Luigi's Mansion 2

Luigi's *Mansion 2* can be defined as much by what it's not as what it is. It has a ghost-wrestling gadget, but it's not *Ghostbusters*. It has charmingly wonky cartoon haunted houses, but it's not *Scooby Doo*. It's set in Mario's world, but it's hardly a cheery platformer. It riffs off all these things and more across a span two to three times that of its precursor, twisting them into new forms and playfully inverting existing ideas.

That subversion starts in the very first mission. Armed with a spectre-sucking vacuum cleaner, the Poltergust 5000, and a multifunctional torch, Luigi may take centre stage in this tale of mending a broken MacGuffin, but it's the story's five new mansions that are the real stars here. Each is packed full of character and is a little bit alive, brimming with rattling cupboards, billowing curtains and eerie wrought iron gates. They're not all simple estates, either: one is built around a giant malevolent tree, while another is set in an abandoned factory awash with sand and clockwork.

But they are all haunted, and that's where the punchy new combat system comes into play. As in the GameCube original, the idea is to stun your spectral foes, then fire up the Poltergust and wrestle against them until they tire enough to be captured. The difference is stunning a ghost now requires a strobe flash into their eyes. Press A for quick, weak blast; hold it and you'll charge up a wider flash, possibly blinding multiple spooks to be wrangled in one go. It's a gamble, but one that often pays – capturing multiple ghosts in a single slurp reaps a greater cash reward than a lone one.

It's a tense balance in all the right ways, one only improved by the aptly named Tension gauge. While a ghost's stamina counter will drain for as long as you're able to keep the Poltergust's nozzle trained on them, consistently tugging in the opposite direction fills the meter. Tap A and your vacuum will surge into a higher gear, depleting a chunk of ghostly vigour and, if timed to coincide with finishing off a foe, adding a gleaming bonus to the reward at the end. As the meter lengthens through upgrades – paid for with the gold you collect – a delightful pressure builds, teasing you to see how long can you hang on without being hit and losing it all in order to earn the biggest payout.

Indeed, collection and the exploration it entails are the driving force behind much of *Luigi's Mansion 2*, and there are plenty of nooks in need of a 'suck at it and see' approach. It helps these stately homes are all rickety old gems, rendered worlds in miniature by the 3D effect. They're broken up into 5-30 minute missions, and across the story's 12-15 hours it remains irresistible to keep peeling away the dust sheets to see what's beneath. Next Level consistently finds new things to show you, with missions taking you to wings of the mansions you've not yet seen, or forcing you to forge new paths through familiar settings. And while the

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Next Level Games
Format 3DS
Release March 20 (Japan), 24 (US), 28 (EU)

Across the story's 12-15 hours it remains irresistible to keep peeling away the dust sheets to see what's beneath



BUMP IN THE NIGHT

Next Level has spent a long time honing Luigi's animation in order to put him through Hell. He quivers as he hums the game's theme tune, flinches each time Professor E Gadd teleports him to a new location and is banged into floors or walls by the fiendish devices that serve to move him from room to room. That he's such a quaking mess makes for a fantastic payoff to the game's wilfully perverse tricks, ensuring that even if you don't jump, the green-capped hero will. Paired with great sound design (which kept at least one theremin player in work), it builds into an atmosphere that's reminiscent of the best funfair ghost rides.

wealth of interactive elements – a nursery of sinister jack-in-the-boxes here, a strip of loose wallpaper there – is so well animated that an exploratory nudge or slurp is often a reward in itself, some result in flurries of bank notes filling the air to be satisfyingly sucked up.

Your total gold haul at mission end feeds into a ranking system, with three stars reserved for masterful play, and it's from this that challenge is derived. The combat learning curve is shallow, and it's rare that any one ghost will pose a threat to seasoned players. That, along with regular health pickups and the resurrection item stashed in each level, meant we didn't see the game over screen till the very end of the third mansion. Things do toughen up later when you're swarmed with foes, but peril here is often illusory. However, that's by design: dying means starting a mission from scratch.

It's better to think of *Luigi's Mansion 2* as a haunted house ride, and there's a lot here to see. Hidden away in each mansion is a set of gems and tricky Boos, the latter revealed with your final bit of kit, the Dark Light Device. This renders invisible objects visible and thwarts illusions, making them spew glowing blue orbs to be siphoned from the air. It's used in combination with the other tools as part of a greater focus on gentle puzzling, which will see you making fiery torches with balls of webbing, floating under makeshift balloons and firing timorous Toads over pools of water.

Despite handing you the full toolset early on, Next Level continues to find new ways to use it. Ideas are repeated or borrowed from familiar sources, but rarely without a contextual shift to make them seem new. Reanimated suits of armour are cliché, but they don't feel that way when you're using them to set up an elaborate fuse to burn a massive spider from its web.

Similar feats of imagination make unlocking the next room something you're anticipating right up to the final boss. The only time the otherwise-taut pacing sags is around the middle, notably in a mission where you repeat a 'follow the ghostly footprints' scenario in a known set of rooms, so used to the stream of novelty have you become. Yet any such moments are quickly washed away by new areas filled with fresh wonders.

It's similar with combat – even in the last mansion you're being pitched new spins on familiar opponents. Green ghosts are the weediest breed but also the most entertaining, picking up all manner of stuff to make you deviate from the strobe and hoover formula. Sunglasses must be yanked from faces with a Tension meter tug, say, while spades are makeshift masks-cum-weapons.

But despite the twitchy combat and compulsive collecting, it all comes back to those creaking mansions. Highly polished under their grime and cobwebs, the treats awaiting in their dark rooms prove Luigi's subversive series still has the capacity to thrill.



LEFT This spider boss awaits at the end of the first mansion. Its lair will require quick thinking if you are to emerge victorious, although you can buy some more time with a quick strobe flash to the eyes.

BELOW Snagging multiple ghosts at once is a win-win scenario, given there will be fewer apparitions to interrupt you, and you reap a greater reward if you can press the attack to hoover them up. Stunning two or more requires a well-timed charged strobe burst, though.

BOTTOM Toad missions are some of the best in the game, partnering our nervous hero with a full-on coward. You'll have to work around their fears, but firing one of the mushroom-headed men with the Poltergust's blow mode is a tactile treat every time you do it



ABOVE While the art style is pitched well, it's elevated by the 3D effect. This lends the rooms a creepy dollhouse quality, something the game itself references in one level, and imbues them with even more atmosphere



Lego City Undercover

The point about Lego, surely, is that it provides a blank slate. A jumble of brightly coloured bricks become whatever imagination and dexterity can make of them. The City brand – an umbrella covering fire stations, hospitals, airports and the rest – distils metropolitan life into plastic simplicity, trusting playful minds to breathe life and personality into that shell. This poses a problem for Traveller's Tales.

Lego alone didn't make this series successful; Star Wars did. As did Batman, Indiana Jones, Harry Potter and The Lord Of The Rings. The company's trick has been to mine the comedic vein of slapstick unearthed when you reduce familiar characters to caricatures. Even without the sheer silliness of the concept, riffing on cinema has reliably provided *Lego* games with story, structure and scenarios for the best part of a decade. What to do, then, without a Hollywood licence?

Riff on cinema anyway, it seems. *Lego City Undercover* still finds most of its humour in parodying scenes you've seen in films, with *Titanic*, *The Dark Knight*, *Dirty Harry*, *The Matrix*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and plenty of others being unofficially rebuilt in plastic bricks during *Undercover*'s course. These gags are part of a wider attempt to impart some personality into its world, but it's a weird, second-hand kind of character. Buzz Lightyear's tragedy in the original *Toy Story* was his belief that he was a dashing space pilot on a mission to defeat the evil Emperor Zurg when he wasn't being played with. The tragedy of the denizens of this *Lego* city is their complete and utter conviction that their sole raison d'être is to endlessly rehearse police movie clichés. Doughnuts, grumpy captains, a maverick hero and a sassy desk-bound dispatcher: they're all here, living in a city built to be a child-friendly pastiche of films most children are unlikely to have even seen.

Often witty, *Undercover* constantly strains to be wittier as part of a doomed attempt to make up for the fundamental blandness of its world. It's hard to imagine how TT Fusion could have done a better job with the building blocks provided than this bright, friendly, always sunny and loosely San Franciscan sprawl, but it's a dull place to explore. A pine-filled forest full of *Lego* animals is a singular highlight, but otherwise *Undercover* doesn't move beyond monotonously metro, the straight lines and hard materials of a nondescript urban environment failing to provide the entertaining clash between the setting and the building materials that other *Lego* games have relied on.

Still, an open-world design does reflect that City theme, lending *Undercover* a My First *GTA* feel. Driving and chasing provide connective tissue between standard *Lego* game levels, and there's fun to be had in playing carjacker in a such a friendly, cartoony city. This anarchic thrill is amplified by a scoring system that

Publisher Nintendo
Developer TT Fusion
Format Wii U
Release March 18 (NA), 28 (EU)

Chases are undermined by frustrating physics. These cars and trucks behave like, well, pieces of plastic



gives you extra bricks (used to build special structures) in return for smashing any obstacles littering the side of the road to pieces, but chases are undermined by frustrating physics. These cars and trucks behave like, well, pieces of plastic when other vehicles smash into them, unpredictably tipping over or getting wedged between bollards. The ability to correct your orientation with a quick flick of the GamePad should make up for this, but it doesn't work.

On your feet, *Undercover* offers a familiar structure, expecting you to stroll into compact levels, break everything in sight and then tidy up after yourself before you leave, the next such room only revealing itself once you've done so. Disguises that cheesy hero Chase McCain can wear then complicate this simple loop. A safe can only be cracked when wearing the criminal disguise, boulders can only be smashed with the miner's pickaxe, and plant pots can only be watered when Chase is dressed as a farmer. It's a simple reconfiguring of the lock-and-key puzzles provided by having multiple characters in other *Lego* games, in other words, except it makes a bit less sense.

Both interior and exterior sections suffer from performance issues, with slowdown and pop-in proving to be particularly frequent annoyances. These problems don't ruin *Undercover* (though not being able to see collectibles until they're within a few metres of your vehicle can be frustrating) but, after a series of lacklustre Wii U ports, it's disappointing to see one of the system's first major exclusives in 2013 run anything less than smoothly.

GamePad integration, meanwhile, never extends beyond modest and functional, rarely asking anything more from the player than some basic photography and a bit of scanning of the surroundings. The rest of the time the screen does little more than provide a home for *Undercover*'s minimap, and its placement there does make navigation trickier than in, say, *GTA*. A trail of studs on the road highlights a route for players, but rarely an optimal one, and flicking your eyes down towards the second screen can easily lead to a crash.

A number of *Undercover*'s flaws won't matter, however, to its target audience. For kids, this gigantic, gently challenging game offers the familiar stud collecting, furniture smashing and rudimentary puzzling of the *Lego* games writ large and sprinkled across a toy town of an open-world game. Only the more irritating driving missions will require the temporary recruitment of mum or dad. But for parents and adults, *Undercover* is a less inviting prospect, even with its satirical undertone. It's a plastic facsimile of *GTA* – a game that was hardly humourless to begin with, and one that has already spawned a genre's worth of more sophisticated rivals and clones.



LEFT *Retro City Rampage* offered a Dark Knight-inspired bank job in its opening moments and *Undercover* does the same. Amusingly, you can smash into vehicles until only a basic frame with wheels remains

TOP There's a freerunning system in place, but since it only works when blue-and-white blocks are present, we can't help thinking TT Fusion has misunderstood the term. Admittedly, 'prescribed running' does sound less exciting.

ABOVE Helicopters turn up late in the game and let you travel around the map quickly. Irritatingly, there's an invisible ceiling that forces you to go around mountain ranges rather than flying over them.

RIGHT Rooftop chases make the best use of the city setting, giving *Undercover* some sense of scale while leaving vehicles behind



Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow – Mirror Of Fate

That *Mirror Of Fate's* plot is so convoluted is some kind of achievement, given 2010's *Lords Of Shadow* was a reboot and not considered *Castlevania* canon. That game's protagonist, Gabriel Belmont, is turned into Dracula after saving the world, and while he'll reprise his good guy role in *LOS's* sequel, he's the antagonist in this 3DS spin-off. When the credits roll, you'll have played as three more Belmonts, each avenging a death. You have to wonder how many more loved ones have to die before the clan gets the message and swears off gear-gated Gothic castles for good.

In fairness, it's quite a castle, home to a full-sized theatre, a spooky toyshop and an abandoned mine as well as the usual belfries. And it's a handsome game, the Belmonts animated with a level of detail that belies their tiny forms. The camera is constantly on the move, pulling out to show a mini-Belmont against a huge castle door, or to give you a wide-angle view during larger puzzles. When your avatar occupies such a small part of the screen, things naturally feel sluggish, but this is a 2D *Castlevania* – you need a wide view of your surroundings to spot the pathways you'll be coming back for later. You can also drop markers on the map on the bottom screen, noting down what blocks the way.

BELOW The parry is one of the most powerful tools in your arsenal, giving you a chance to counter and some precious breathing space. All enemies have unblockable attacks, signalled by a white glow, that must be dodged

Publisher Konami
Developer Mercury Steam
Format 3DS
Release Out now



ELDER SCROLLS

Perhaps the game's most common secrets are the scrolls found on dead bodies. They're certainly the most lucrative, offering a hefty chunk of XP, and they're magical, recording a fallen adventurer's last thoughts. Some drop hints about nearby puzzles, others warn you of imminent danger, perhaps offering a couple of pointers about an impending boss fight. All give a sense of purpose to exploration, and reward you for going off the beaten track.

The camera zooms in closer for battles, and Mercury Steam's flair for combat has survived the move to 3DS. There's depth here, but it takes time to shine through, with a levelling system handing out new moves one by one. When fully upgraded, you have an embarrassment of riches: launchers and juggle combos, dashes and guard breakers, and a block button that becomes a parry when properly timed, plus character-specific projectiles. It's an elegant, flexible system, and your moveset is persistent across the game's three acts, even carrying over into subsequent playthroughs. Sadly, that doesn't apply to everything you find along the way. You start a new character stripped of the projectiles and powers you found with the previous one. When the adventure is over and you dive back in to mop up the secrets you've marked on the map, you can only do so by replaying each act, or the whole game, from the start.

Three times the protagonists gives you three times the number of toys and an engaging, if thoroughly convoluted, story, but it's not without cost. What Simon, Trevor and Alucard give to the mechanics and narrative they take from its flow: you still feel gated, even when you've got all the gear. It's a deflating discovery, but few games save their disappointments for their endgames. And *Mirror Of Fate*, like *Lords Of Shadow* before it, feels like *Castlevania*, but carves out a likeable identity of its own.

7





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Year Walk

Publisher Simogo
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

After the wistful whimsy of *Bumpy Road* and the cheery rhythms of *Beat Sneak Bandit*, this is quite a departure for Swedish studio Simogo. *Year Walk* is a dark-hearted firstperson adventure that represents a leap into the unknown for both player and developer. It's a daring move that pays off handsomely in an iOS game like nothing else on the platform.

It's a horror novella in game form, and as such is best savoured in the small hours, with headphones inserted and volume turned up. It strikes – and holds – that fine balance between anticipation and trepidation as you cautiously step through a snowy forest without ever knowing your destination.

Storytelling takes precedence over systems, but the environmental puzzles are intelligently handled and navigation is smart. Simple swipes take you through a three-dimensional world layered in 2D planes, scenery folding into view as if you're exploring a pop-up book. It's a papercraft fairytale that only gets more disturbing the further you venture.

As you'd expect from the studio behind *Beat Sneak Bandit*, sound plays a critical role. A blend of evocative effects and sparse themes does much to build a menacing atmosphere, and it's this restraint that gives the infrequent shocks greater power. A free companion app adds texture to the game's mythical elements, its role becoming more crucial still in a dazzling, head-spinning endgame. If this is what happens when Simogo explores its dark side, it should do so more often. **9**



Anodyne

Publisher Analgesic Productions
Developer In-house
Format Mac, PC
Release Out now

Valentine's Day has been and gone, but we're sure Link won't mind this love letter from Analgesic Productions. Top-down action-adventure *Anodyne* is a beautiful pastiche of *Link's Awakening*, taking the gloomy forests, intricate dungeons and pastoral loveliness of Nintendo's 8bit world and recomposing it in richer, darker hues.

Forget Ganon's Dark World, *Anodyne*'s land is a far more disturbing mirror image of Hyrule. It's a place where anthropomorphised cat people ponder mortality in a manner entirely unlike your average Goron; a place where handily placed helper stones are as likely to remind you of your mother's aging body as dispense advice; and where Link himself can be spotted trying to eke a living from the unyielding land. It's dark, but has a strange lightness of touch: the typical hero's questline and pixellated cutesiness sugarcoat the bitter themes.

And beneath the surface, this is a faithful recreation of Link's handheld adventures, with single-screen puzzles and crisp melee combat culled straight from his pre-DS days. Sadly, it's missing gear gating, and the ever-expanding inventory of tools that comes with it, but *Anodyne* offers in its place a mature lack of handholding or convenient interpretations of its mysterious, fourth-wall breaking world. This is a game for those who grew up in Hyrule but have spent more time in Lordran in recent years. Some finicky platforming frustrates, but then Link didn't get an auto-jump till *Ocarina Of Time*. **8**



Kairo

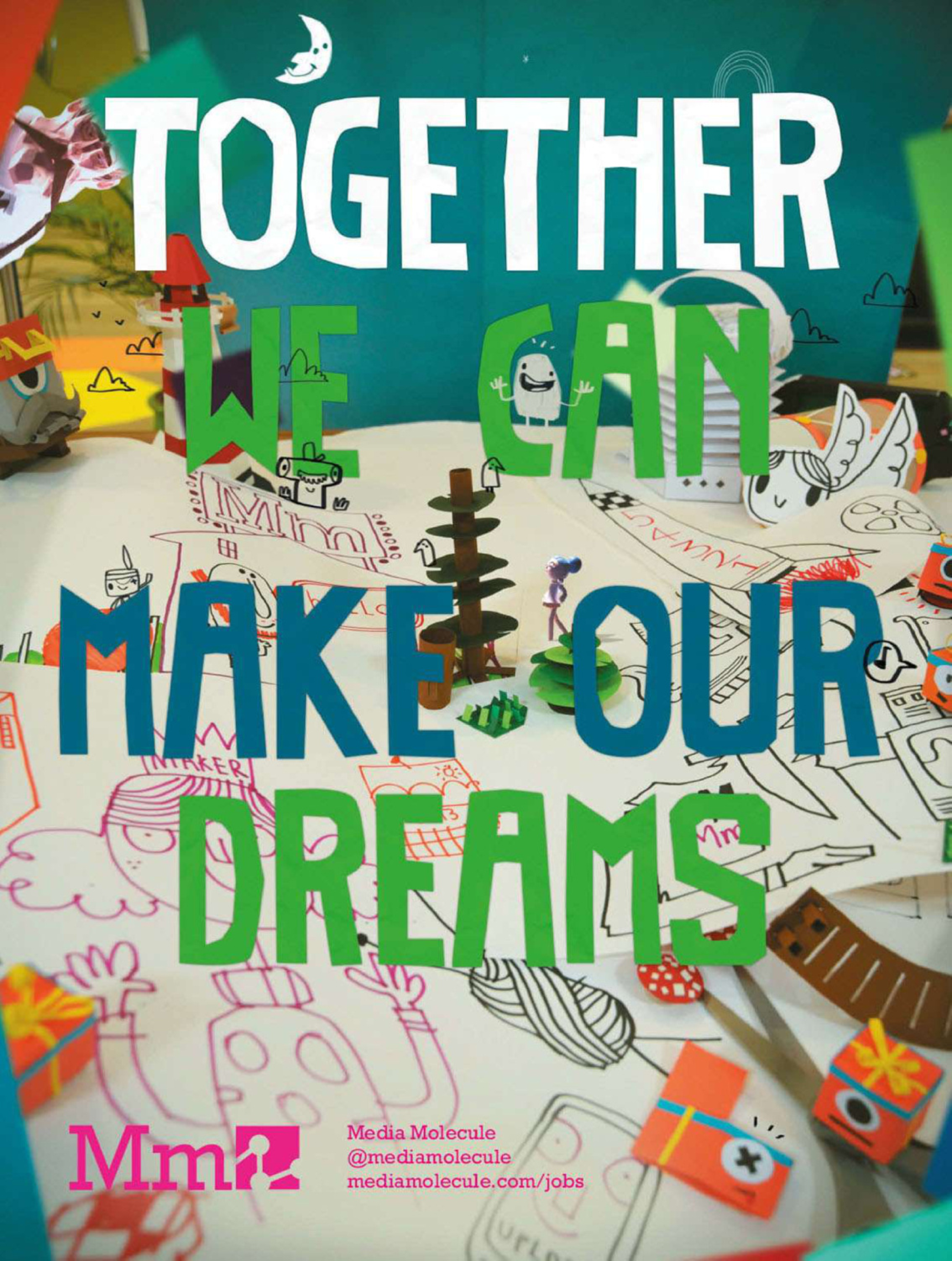
Publisher Richard Perrin
Developer In-house
Format Android, iOS (version tested), Mac, PC
Release Out now

While it may not have an interact button, *Kairo* manages to avoid the semantic minefield separating *Proteus*' island from the gaming mainland. There are navigation puzzles here, switches and pressure plates, oblique clues to puzzle over and even codes to decipher. This is most assuredly a proper game, if rigid enforcement of unstable definitions is your thing, though that doesn't stop it from being an oddly contemplative and serene version of the form.

Dropping players in a dreamscape made up of vast, imposing structures floating in a void, there's a weirdly techno-theistic feel to *Kairo*. These sprawling chambers and monolithic towers have a cathedral-like sense of grandeur, but a distinct lack of humanity, as if you've stumbled into an afterlife for retired computer programs. The result is a feeling that your presence is a trespass twinned with a powerful desire to see more and explore. Puzzles control the pace of your progress rather than hinder it. With the exception of a few obscure, optional challenges, most are generously signposted as you restore these weird, inert structures to life.

But while the beauty and evocative nature of *Kairo* has survived the move from PC form to iOS unscathed, the controls have not. Movement is flighty and unwieldy, and in desperate need of a sidestep. Your actions aren't often time-sensitive enough for this to matter, but in a game about exploring a mysterious land, it's a pity navigation is such a challenge. **7**







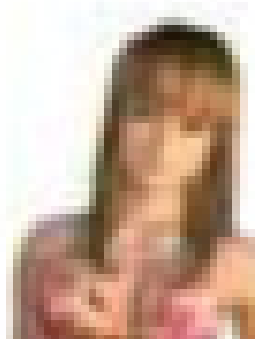
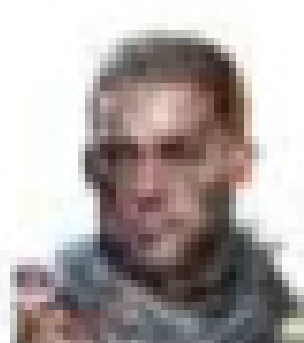
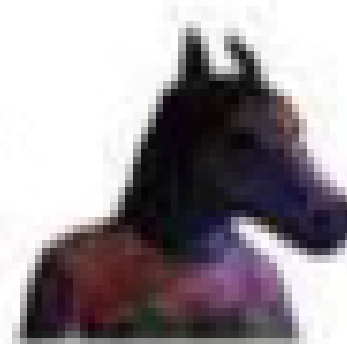
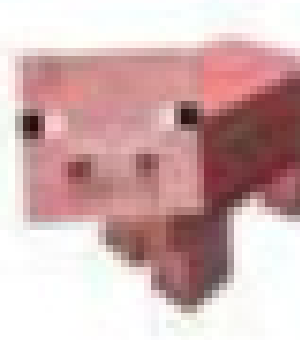




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create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

This issue's **People, Places, Things** gets underway on p114, where we catch up with InXile Entertainment head Brian Fargo  to discuss a career in RPGs and *Wasteland 2*. Given that Fargo greenlit the first game in the series, it seems fitting that on p116 we examine *Fallout*'s sinister underground Vaults . On p118, we steal a faintly embarrassed glance at videogames' continuing obsession with the female bosom  and ask if our industry has become any more sensitive with its portrayals of it. Our **Studio Profile** on p120 goes inside Yager Games , the German studio that smartly subverted the shooter genre with 2012 critical hit *Spec Ops: The Line*. From Berlin we head to the skylines of 1980s Florida, with a look at **The Making Of...** Dennaton Games' ultraviolent *Hotline Miami*  on p124. Meanwhile, **The Art Of...** on p128 discusses the vision behind the design of *Minecraft*'s  building blocks with Swedish maker Mojang. Wrapping things up for us this issue, as ever, are our columnists, with designer **Tadhg Kelly**  (p132) disputing David Cage's claim that videogames need to grow up – at least, in the way he says they need to – before **Clint Hocking**  (p134) tells us about a game he truly despises, but can't stop playing. **Randy Smith**  (p136) offers some thoughts on the merits of right brain creativity and extols the virtues of striking off in random directions instead of following a safe fixed path. Finally, writer **James Leach**  (p138) closes the section with a focus, appropriately, on videogame endings.



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Darkstalkers' Morrigan isn't the only female fighter with an impractical bust. On p118, we question whether gaming's attitudes to breasts are becoming more mature

CREATE
PEOPLE, PLACES, THINGS

People

BRIAN FARGO

The man who made Fallout a reality is heading back to the wastes



Stung by his departure from Interplay, Brian Fargo founded inXile in 2002. More than a decade and a \$3 million Kickstarter haul later, *Wasteland 2* is finally in production

One pivotal, life-changing moment of **Brian Fargo's** career almost didn't happen. Between 1994 and 1997, a motley crew of designers, creators and QA testers were working long hours for low pay on a new Interplay IP – a roleplaying game that eschewed the traditional elves and goblins in favour of a future world savaged by gun-wielding mutants and nuclear war. Getting the game from preproduction to the shelf was an uphill struggle, with two near-cancellations and designers squabbling with marketing and executives over everything from the setting to the name. Finally, after taking an early build of this troubled-yet-promising title home for the weekend, Fargo – who founded Interplay as a programmer and game designer in 1983 – gave the game his blessing. He went to lead programmer Tim Cain and said, "You should call this *Fallout*."

Fallout was a risky proposition that paid off, picking up nines and tens in reviews and spawning an equally successful sequel just a year later. But its hard-won success was more than merely a personal high point for Fargo and its designers, and *Fallout* became the poster child for the Interplay RPG – an expansive world in peril with plenty of backstory to uncover. "Exploration has always been the thing that motivated me in the game world," says Fargo. "I love wondering what is around each corner, what lies inside the cave I can't get to yet, or the meaning of a cryptic passage."

What *Fallout* designers Tim Cain, Leonard Boyarsky and Chris Taylor had created chimed with Fargo's youth spent reading comic books, watching sci-fi movies and playing *Dungeons & Dragons*. It clearly did the same for many others, becoming one of the best-loved series in gaming history.

But the good times did not last. Despite positive press and fan responses to Interplay's post-*Fallout* RPGs, such as *Baldur's Gate*, *Planescape: Torment* and *Icewind Dale*, Fargo had no massive commercial hits to sell to shareholders. With mounting pressure to deliver success on consoles as well as PC, Interplay fell on hard times. Finally, after disagreements with the company's investors, Fargo left in 2000. Being forced to leave the company he'd created and managed for 17 years was tough, and Fargo took it hard. "When you run a company like that, you become one and the same," he says. "It was a shock for some time when it wasn't part of me."

Having put Interplay behind him, in 2002 Fargo decided to found a new studio, inXile Entertainment. Here, after ten years of making mainly smaller games for websites and smartphones, he started to toy once more with the notion of making a sequel to one of his best-loved RPGs: 1988's *Wasteland*. Since the original's release on the Commodore 64 and Apple II, fans had been in constant contact to beg for a follow-up to *Fallout's* spiritual predecessor, but publishers always passed on the project – and sometimes ungraciously. "I was in one meeting, sitting there with a co-creator of *Fallout*, Jason Anderson, and the executive was text messaging during the entire presentation," recalls Fargo. "The guy barely looked up. It took a lot of willpower for me to just not walk out of the meeting."

And so finally, on March 13, 2012, Fargo cut out the middlemen and went directly to the thousands of fans who'd spent more than two decades asking for a game that publishers didn't seem interested in. Turning to the crowdfunding website Kickstarter, Fargo and his team at inXile gambled that they could source the million dollars needed to fund *Wasteland 2* by appealing to the players rather than the suits – with Fargo even offering up \$100,000 of his own cash if the pool only made it to \$900,000. In the end, the Kickstarter closed at three times that amount, raking in \$2,933,252 in 30 days. "Ironically,

I am fortunate that no publisher picked the game up," he says, "since [it's now] being created with the right sensibilities in mind."

Those sensibilities will look pleasantly familiar to gamers au fait with Interplay's back catalogue, because *Wasteland 2* shares the same key ingredients as its RPG cousins from the '90s,

namely a rich universe and a deep script. And although he makes a point of playing most new games on release, Fargo regrets that this style of game-making appears to have fallen out of fashion in many current-generation RPGs.

"One sees less of this style of game [because] the newer RPGs use large cinematic pieces or spoken dialogue at every turn," he says. "In our case, we craft these games up to the last minute... [That's not easy] if you already have 20 million dollars' [worth] of prerendered cutscenes."

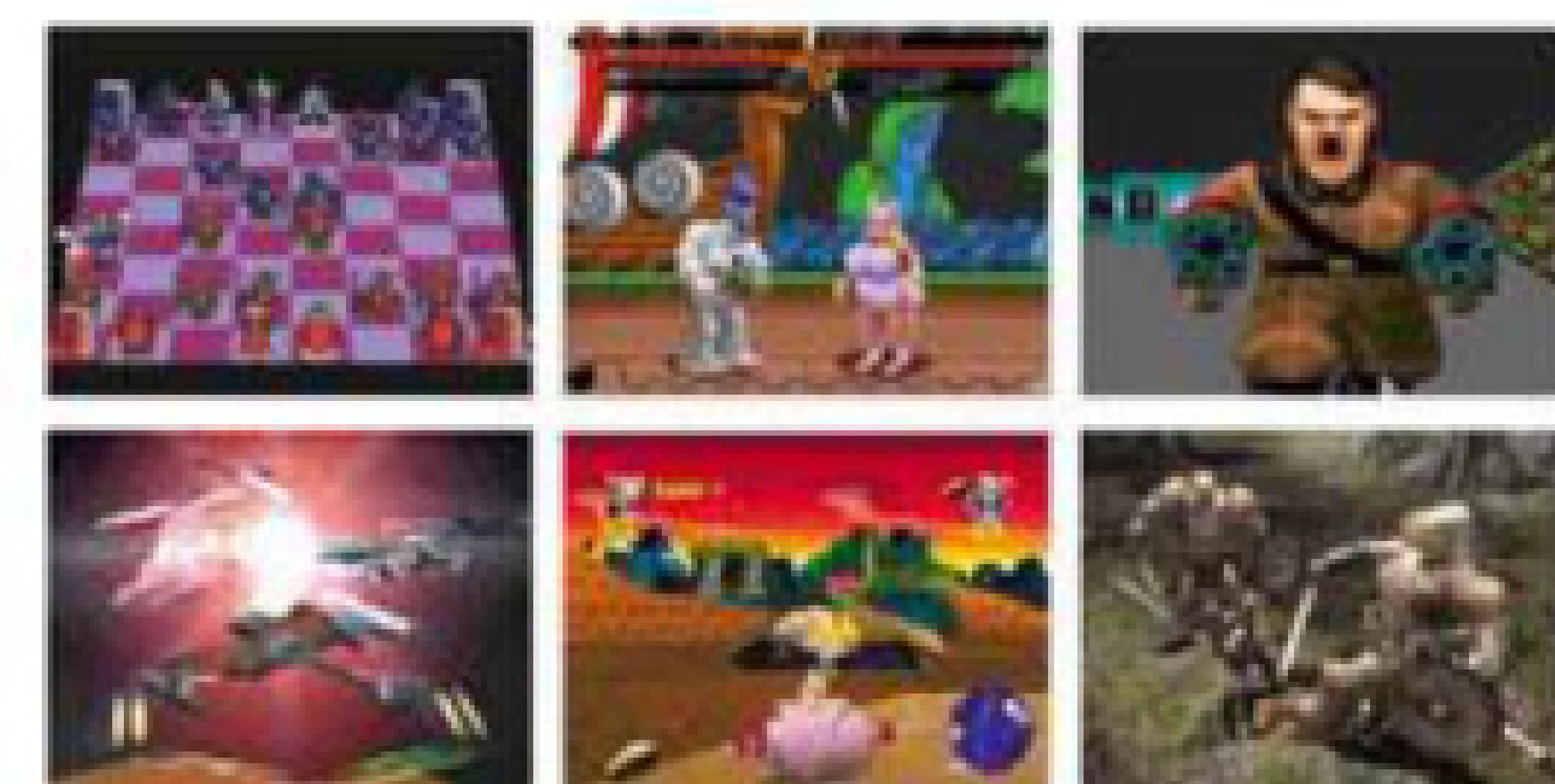
Gratifyingly, the game's 60,000 backers seem to share his point of view – a relief for all involved. "You never really know the true interest until people vote with their wallets," Fargo says.

"Exploration has always motivated me in the game world – wondering what's around each corner"

CV

URL www.inxile.net

Selected Softography *Battle Chess*, *Clay Fighter*, *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Star Trek: Fleet Command*, *Earthworm Jim 3D*, *The Bard's Tale*



Spurred on by the Kickstarter success, Fargo and inXile began to expand on the idea of getting fans involved in the project by asking them to contribute not just money but talent to *Wasteland 2's* production. By building *Wasteland 2* in Unity, Fargo's team members have access to models from the online Unity Store, meaning they can effectively outsource chunks of the game's development to 3D artists from around the world. After an influx of emails asking how modellers could get involved with the game, inXile set up a series of contests, tasking fans with designing, say, a water tower or gun turret. If the studio liked the results, it would buy them for *Wasteland 2*.

"Our experiment with Unity was based on the sheer number of people who were sending us assets for free, or asking how they could be involved in some way," says Fargo. "This was not a strategy that we counted on to make the game, but it certainly is going to make the visual density higher than it would have been otherwise."

It's also a potential recruiting tool. "My bet is that we will discover some talent from this that will ultimately turn into some kind of more formalised relationship," Fargo explains.

With high-profile crowdfunded projects such as *Wasteland 2* still in their development stages, Kickstarter remains – for the moment at least – an exciting but unproven quantity for large-scale games. But as publishers race to push out safe-bet first- and thirdperson sequels to modern franchises, Fargo and the staff at inXile are picking at the stitching that holds traditional game development together. Crowdsourcing – be that of money or talent – isn't just the future for Fargo and his team, but the end of a long and frustrating journey.

"The people here stuck through some rough times," he concludes. "Every creative person's dream is to be able to make their art in the fashion that works for them. My dream for the next ten years is simple: I want to be doing the same thing I'm doing now." ■

CREATE
PEOPLE, PLACES, THINGS

Places

THE VAULTS

Fallout's underground shelters aren't the refuges they seem to be



Vault 13 is where *Fallout* begins, with the player sent off into the world to look for a replacement water chip. When the character's grandchild returns in the sequel, it has been transformed by Enclave intervention

From *Fallout* (series)
 Developers Black Isle Studios, Bethesda,
 Obsidian Entertainment
 Origin US
 Debut 1997

Beside a section of collapsed highway in *Fallout 3* is a 200-year-old billboard with a family on it. The father smokes a pipe, the mother is in pearls and the son is dressed up in a jacket and tie. All three are smiling. The paint is peeling, but when you get closer you see that this family is part of a long procession filing towards a gleaming metal hole in the side of a mountain. Mushroom clouds billow in the distance. Above them a faded banner exclaims, "Vault secure!"

Ever since the original Vault Dweller was dispatched from Vault 13 to replace a broken water chip, the Vault Network and its inhabitants have been a defining feature of *Fallout's* pitiless Wasteland. They're sometimes starting areas, providing *Fallout* and *Fallout 3* with an immediate contrast between the comparatively cushy surroundings of a nuclear shelter and the filth and barbarism of the world outside. More commonly, the Vaults are queuing locations or dungeons full of mediocre loot. But unless you're grunting your way through one of the games' famed low-Intelligence playthroughs, you'll quickly discover that most vaults are a broken promise of sanctuary, their rusted chambers buzzing not with human life, but with giant insects skittering over skeletons in blue jumpsuits, or crawling with mutants.

In the murky world of *Fallout's* expansive canon, the Vault Network begins life as the US's government-funded Project Safehouse in 2054. The UK and the rest of the European Commonwealth are at war over oil in the Middle East, while the US and China are ploughing what resources they have left into both conventional and unconventional weaponry for a face off that seems almost inevitable. A plague has already killed tens of thousands in the US, while a terrorist nuclear weapon has destroyed Tel Aviv. The twin threats of nuclear world war and plague thus lead to Project Safehouse and the construction of 122 Vaults to shield a fraction of the population if the worst should occur, which it eventually does.

Before the Great War, as the resulting disaster was christened, the Vaults were like modern-day battleships or fighter jets: technological marvels whose grim purpose was lost in impressive numbers and statistics. But few ever believed that this technology would be anything more than a marvel. The grinning Vault Boy and the happy families in the posters are symptomatic of a nation refusing to fully embrace a terrifying reality.

The real tragedy of the Vaults is the beguiling mixture of optimism and sadism tied up in their design



The insides of a working Vault are utilitarian and quaintly retrofuturistic. If only the dwellers knew what fates they'd escaped

Even the Vaults' own architects shrugged off the idea that full-on nuclear war was a real possibility. Hidden away in a terminal in Vault 0 is a Vault-Tec representative's missive explaining that due to the "dwindling chance [of] actual nuclear war" its costly backup systems would be replaced with high-class restaurants, piano bars and "two subterranean hunting grounds stocked with rare animals purchased from world-renowned zoos".

It's a funny, preposterous moment, but also incredibly sad.

Yet the real tragedy of the Vaults is the beguiling mixture of optimism and sadism tied up in their design. You see, there's a darker purpose to these chambers: most aren't here to be safe havens, but rather centres for human experimentation on a grand scale.

Chemical, biological, social and various other bizarre tests are set in motion for the apparent benefit of the shadowy Enclave. And even in the control vaults, which should be fit for purpose, the estimates of their durability have been drastically overestimated, while the supplies provided are laughably inadequate to face the world outside.

Their inhabitants' unpreparedness is what makes exploring any of the Vaults so haunting. Inside each, the evidence of what life has been like here is either a stark contrast to the world you've wandered in from, or a nightmare made real. Old email accounts preserve petty squabbles between inhabitants. Posters remind citizens of the Vault's annual cake bake off. And yet those very

inhabitants and their descendants often now crawl these corridors as ghouls or mutants, or served a gruesome purpose long ago.

The dwellers in the few successful Vaults by and large feel safe in their ignorance of the outside world. Surely with their agricultural training holodisks and enough goodwill, rebuilding America will be a cinch when the time comes.

When the door finally opens, they wander blinking into the Wasteland's sun, ready with their bottles of purified water and Garden of Eden Creation Kits to reestablish civilisation. Sometimes, they are eaten by a grisly horror, or get dragged off by super mutants to be dipped into vats of mutagenic goo. The hapless goodwill of the Vault dwellers is underlined by *Fallout 2's* intro, where the door of Vault 13 rolls away to reveal a squad of power-armoured baddies outside. Silhouetted against the bright lights of the chamber, one of the dwellers waves uncertainly. All are then cut to pieces in a storm of bullets, their deaths reflected in the pitiless yellow eyes of an Enclave soldier.

And this resonates because, for all the factions and conspiracies in which the Vaults are key, you're among the few with ties to one. Because you know the inner workings of a Vault, squinting in the dim light of a ruined one is all the more harrowing. Almost every Vault you explore is a stark reminder of trust betrayed, of another group of wide-eyed folk sent to their grim deaths. Now only some faded, tragically cheery Wasteland posters remain to identify their last refuges as anything more than creaking, rusting tombs. ■

CREATE
PEOPLE, PLACES, THINGS

Things

BREASTS

Considering the history of one of gaming's most puerile fixations



You may recognise this buxom beach volleyball player from E121, AKA the girl issue, published in February 2003. Have the attitudes to women in games improved over the 10 years since?

Before you fire off those indignant emails, let us explain. Breasts are things, as all things are. The widely acknowledged but ongoing issue is how in videogames breasts are treated as just things, albeit enormous ones, inflated by the intense scrutiny they receive. They start at real-world large and expand into fantasy. They're presented with a leer, precariously trussed in tiny straps or spilling from bustiers rather than sensibly secured – think of *SoulCalibur*'s Ivy entering battle armoured in all the wrong places.

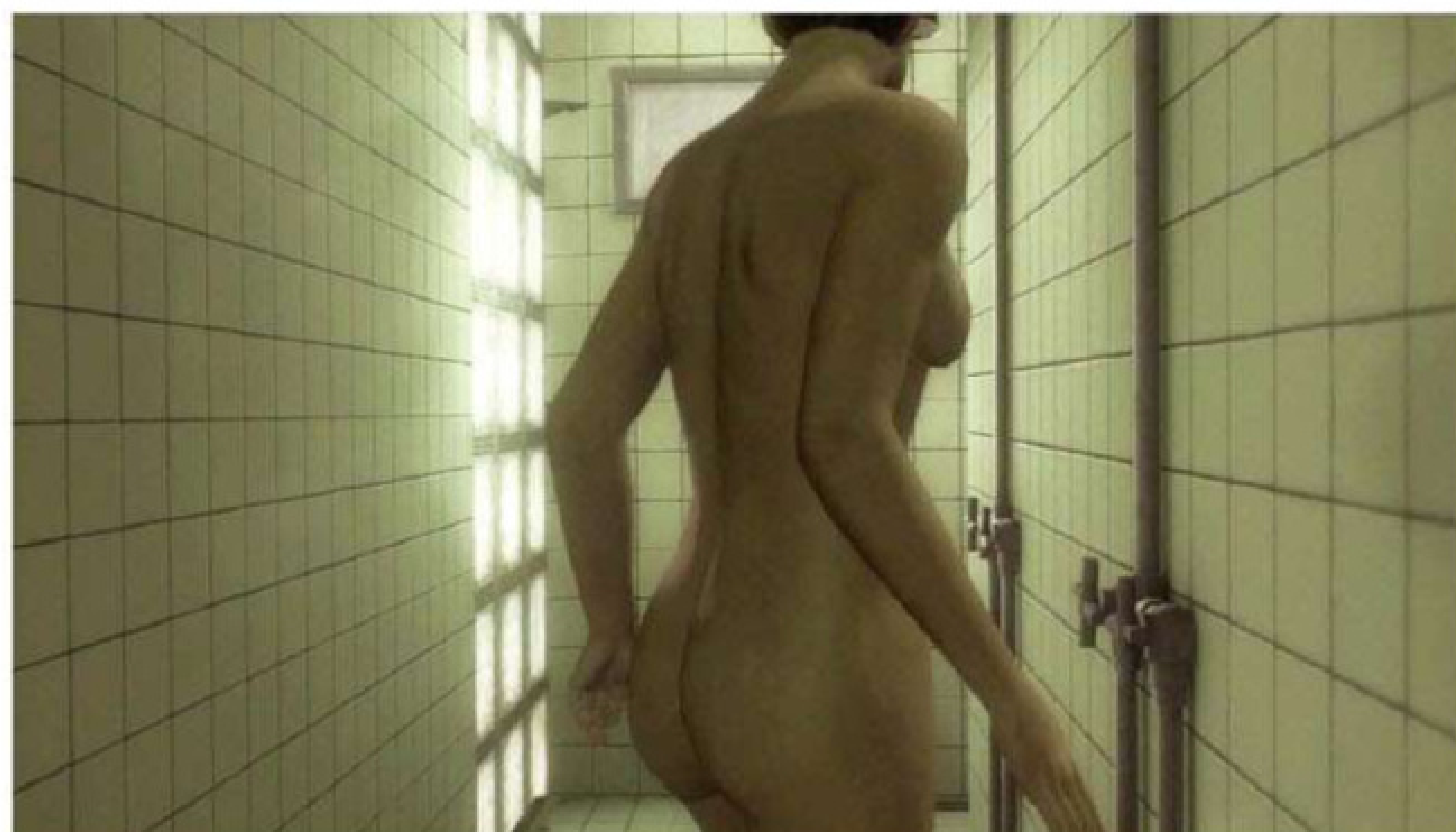
Muscle-bound male avatars set equally unattainable body standards for men, who generally look no more like Kratos than most women do Bayonetta. But unlike muscles, gigantic breasts are not necessarily signs of health and capability. If they were real, the female fighters in everything from *Darkstalkers* to *Dead Or Alive* would be crippled by back pain. Samus Aran, an oft-cited female role model, would get terribly chafed for the questionable choice of wearing a flirty bikini top under her armour in *Metroid*. Lulu from *Final Fantasy VIII* could hardly get off a fire spell for hiking up her décolletage. Queen Odette from *Odin Sphere* would simply snap in half.

There's nothing wrong with dreaming of idealised versions of ourselves. But when male fantasies are projected onto both sexes, female players who want empowered characters to identify with are left out. Oversized busts may be an aspect of body image bias rather than a flaw unique to videogames, but they reaffirm the stereotype, contrary to all data on skyrocketing female participation, that gaming is a boys' club. It's a stereotype that looks like fact when you consider the tiny percentage of females working in this industry.

Having more women in this fraternity-like culture could help diversify the measurements of our top-heavy heroines, but a hurdle would remain: public calls for realistic proportions are sometimes at odds with consumer demands. It's long been suspected that *Dead Or Alive* – the fighting series that branched out into beach volleyball and became famed for its bosom physics – is popular mainly for its mammaries. Consider, for instance, that when developer Team Ninja tried reducing the cup sizes in the *Dead Or Alive 5* demo, it had to quickly double them back after core fans protested.

Gaming's obsession with breasts is part of a juvenile medium's awkward process of floundering towards mature themes. We saw the same thing

**The rumour of
nude breasts was
enough to propel
FMV slasher Night
Trap to notoriety,
and it wasn't true**



Heavy Rain's Madison is played by model Jacqui Ainsley, and Quantic Dream shows off her bust on more than one occasion

happen in comic books. Anyone over 30 who grew up reading Marvel superheroes vividly remembers the moment in the late '80s when suddenly breasts got very big and costumes very small, as though comics themselves had violently hit puberty. By the early '90s, women heroes were grotesquely thin, bulbous, swaybacked creatures.

Videogames, arriving much later but evolving much faster, were dying to get in on the action even before the technology got up to speed. As early as 1982, people ploughed through the abysmal Atari 2600 title *Custer's Revenge* for the 'reward' of glimpsing a few pink pixels in the rough outline of a breast. In 1992, the rumour of nude breasts was enough to propel FMV slasher *Night Trap* to notoriety, and it wasn't even true. In 1994's *Killer Instinct*, one glimpse of Black Orchid's malformed plastic nubs struck opponents dead with horror.

This line between objectification and violence remains thin today. To their credit, many expressed outrage upon learning that the collector's edition of *Dead Island Riptide* would come with a statue of a dismembered torso in a Union Flag bikini, every trace of identity torn away, with horrible wounds all over bar for the large, round breasts.

From the concubines of *God Of War* and the strippers of *Duke Nukem* to the topless NPCs of *Elder Scrolls* and the steamy showers of *Heavy Rain*, bared breasts are now an important but

invisible bullet point on the back of many a game box, no longer the sole province of cult niches such as the *Leisure Suit Larry* series. Playboy publishes a semi-annual Girls Of Gaming feature, with characters such as Rayne from *BloodRayne* rendered topless. Even when women in games manage to stay clothed, their breasts often remain a point of fixation. Rosemary from *Metal Gear Solid 4* speaks seriously while you use the Sixaxis pad to quiver each of her breasts, just for kicks. It's an Easter egg that veers perilously close to being a humiliating fondling simulator. Only rarely are breasts emphasised in a strong or maternal light, as in the case of Princess Gwynevere from *Dark Souls*, whose imposingly copious frame transcends sexualisation like an ancient fertility icon.

There are signs of progress, though. The most famous breasts in games belong to Lara Croft, and were created at the slip of a mouse. Lead designer Toby Gard accidentally increased her breast size to 150 per cent, creating an iconic pair of sharp-tipped cones. They became more rounded and realistic as the series progressed, but stayed huge, leaving Croft stranded between sex doll for boys and role model for girls. That tension is finally resolved in the *Tomb Raider* reboot (reviewed p94), which features a more athletically built Croft. But executive producer Ron Rosenberg tainted its female-friendly pedigree when he said players didn't identify with Croft so much as they wanted to protect her, especially when scavengers were trying to rape her. Yes, progress is always staggered, but are we moving two steps forwards and one back, or vice versa? ■

STUDIO PROFILE

Yager

How a group of friends went from the East Berlin demoscene to the global stage with *Spec Ops: The Line*



Yager's team on the banks of the river Spree. This photo was taken just before *Spec Ops: The Line* shipped in June 2012.

For 28 years the Berlin Wall separated the people of Germany's capital, limiting the socialist East's access to the media and technologies West Germans took for granted. In East Berlin, up-to-date computer hardware was uncommon, making gaming a hobby for only the most ardent enthusiasts, but software was cracked and traded by pirates. In a sense, Yager was born from East Berlin's piracy scene, but piracy was a response to scarcity, and it was scarcity that had the most profound effect on Yager's founders and the city they call home.

"I think that's why there are so few developers in Berlin today," says Yager's managing director, **Timo Ullmann**. "When Germany was still divided, there was a division in access to technology and Berlin never had a chance to become a hotspot for this kind of entertainment."

Of Yager's five founders, only one grew up outside the city and none on the western side of the Wall. IT director Roman Golka, creative director Uwe Beneke, director of development **Philipp Schellbach** and Ullmann all attended computer clubs in East Germany, where they played pirate copies of the Commodore 64 games that made it across the divide. Later, they learned their programming skills cracking games, as well as on the demo scene under the name Dynamic Technologies, or 'Dytec'. "You can still see our intro on YouTube, I think," Schellbach says. "Any pirate fan will know them!"

"It was always cracked games in East Berlin," says Ullmann. "And so there was a point when we got curious about how we'd crack them ourselves, and then a point when we became curious about how we would make them ourselves. When the Wall fell, we visited the famous Chaos Computer Club, but their agenda was very different to ours – they were about hacking and breaking security, and we were more into the idea of using technology to entertain people with music or games or demos."

The computer clubs in East Berlin had created a generation of hackers and crackers, with the desire, though not necessarily the tools, they needed for success when the east/west border opened in November 1989. "Philipp and Roman and I had worked on a couple of demos for small C64 games," says Ullmann. "We had a shoot 'em up, a rip-off of *Bomberman* and even some self-created hardware so we could play it with four joysticks. We offered the demos to some



Spec Ops' Dubai is an artistic and technical achievement, which Yager credits to the number of technical artists on staff

West German publishers and they were kind enough to write back and say, you know, 'We like what you did, but we don't sell C64 any more.' We should have moved on to Amiga and PC, but C64 was pretty much all we knew in East Berlin. Uwe, our creative director, was an Atari guy... but the rest of us were programming in assembler on C64. I think it taught us a lesson; even back then, we realised how important it was to push as far as you can when you're working with very limited computing power."

In the Eastern Bloc, games were a tiny part of a computing industry where utility was valued over entertainment, but the fall of the Wall opened the door for the four friends to study computer sciences at Humboldt University with a mind to making games. All bar Schellbach would drop out to work on shooter Yager in 1998.

"We didn't think about what we might be doing ten years from now," says Ullmann. "We saw

more future in the game than in the study. We were working on a prototype and meeting once a week at my flat when a friend of mine introduced us to Mathias [Wiese]."

Years spent on the demo scene had given the four an understanding of technology, but the art direction would come from Wiese. The youngest of the five, he'd heard about Yager through friends and arrived with a folder filled with art for a game he had only heard described. "His art was perfect for the game," says Ullmann, "and together we built a very 'shiny' demo that was an impressive display of our engine. Of course, we would have to throw all that away when we got down to the business of actually making the game.

"But first we had to sell it, and we weren't used to selling ourselves or to elevator pitches, so we had to learn how to pitch the hard way. We didn't have a name or an office, nobody had heard of us and we were travelling to trade shows



Founded 1999

Employees 100+

Key staff Timo Ullmann (managing director), Philipp Schellbach (director of development), Uwe Beneke (creative director)

URL www.yager.de

Selected softography Yager, Spec Ops: The Line

Current project TBA

with this shiny prototype. We'd take publishers back to Roman's apartment for meetings, because his was the nicest. Then in 1999, THQ Germany picked up our Yager prototype, I think based on the art and engine more than anything. The first thing we had to do was find an office and, of course, we stayed in Berlin."

The Yager of today is on its third office, a bright, open loft space on the banks of the river Spree in Berlin-Kreuzberg. It's short on air conditioning but long on tall windows, which open onto the quiet street and courtyard. Yager's space has expanded with the studio and its 100-strong team is now spread across two floors of the old building. But it was a team of just six who walked into Yager's first home in '99.

"Building up was really slow," says Ullmann. By the end of the first year, the studio had seven developers, and Yager would ship in 2003 with a team of just 20 and a handful of freelancers. "Back then, hiring was a real problem for us. We were working on the project and all the overheads had to be handled by us between programming work. It wasn't a very professional setup, but choosing roles was quite a natural process. We had two creative guys, and it was clear one of them was better suited for art and the other for design. Philipp was always the technical one. We were all coding back then, but I was the one who was calling all the publishers, so I kept that role. It was just a natural process."

THQ's console focus meant the studio had to learn to grow, and early suggestions of a Dreamcast port for Yager gave way in favour of Microsoft's then-rumoured Xbox. The specs were a close match for Yager's PC benchmark, and the studio found itself among Microsoft's list of developers for 2000's E3 Xbox showcase.

"We were lucky Yager was successful for us, or else we'd have had to rename the studio," says Ullmann, only half joking. The team's first game, a thirdperson airborne shooter similar to



Features drawn from several unreleased Yager prototypes and tech demos found their way into *Spec Ops: The Line*. Like Rocksteady, the studio had time to study Unreal Engine 3, and the result is one of the most visually accomplished Unreal-powered games of the generation

Rogue Squadron, received average-to-favourable reviews but its engine demonstrated the studio's technical expertise. Those foundations laid a decade earlier would form the core of Yager's processes – an obsession with technology that would later be displayed in *Spec Ops: The Line*.

Just surviving to make *The Line* would be a stretch for the studio. "We couldn't believe it when THQ decided not to publish our game in America," says Ullmann. "THQ published Yager in Europe, and the German and UK guys were always very supportive of us, but the US guys said 'It's not Star Wars, so we're not going to do it.' They had paid for the development, but they weren't going to bring it out! We cut a deal where we could buy back the US rights and share revenue with THQ, and that's how we ended up published by Kemco and DreamCatcher."

With a finished game ready to be published, finding interested partners was easy, with explaining why THQ had dropped it being the only sticking point. Yager hit PAL territories in 2003, but wouldn't reach the US till October 2004, when eyes were turning to the next generation. Still, the injection of dollars was just enough to keep Yager afloat.

"Let's be honest," says Ullmann, "Yager was a good start for us, but it wasn't a huge success financially. Unfortunately, the flight genre became quite a niche over the four years of development. It was just us, *Panzer Dragoon* and *Rogue Squadron* when we finally released. In the year between the PAL and American releases, THQ rejected the sequel and we had a hard time finding another project. Kemco and DreamCatcher basically saved us."

Yager's US release bought the studio time, but next two years would be challenging as publishers invested in and then canned original prototypes in favour of more bankable existing brands. Of several demos worked up by Yager, *Partisans* and *Eye Of The Storm* went furthest into development. The first – a WWII shooter set on an island in the

Mediterranean filled with Nazi superweapons players could turn on their creators – was rejected for being unportable to PS2, but received enough investment to keep Yager going for a time.

A physics demo for NovodeX – later integrated into Ageia's PhysX – kept the studio afloat until Yager's thirdperson mech-hunting game *Eye Of The Storm* received funding from a major publisher. But when the publisher backed out in 2005, Yager was again without money. "Things were really tight there," says Ullmann. "I went to GDC 2005 and I knew if I didn't come back with a deal then the lights would go out. Atari invested in *Eye Of The Storm* and saved us, but only for about a month or so. They really couldn't afford to develop a game of that scale for the next gen at the time, so we had to find another partner."

As always, Yager had an impressive prototype, this time running on Unreal 3. "A good demo has always been important to us," Ullmann explains. "There's only so much you can describe to someone, but if you have a prototype or a video you can really sell the game." A third publisher temporarily backed *Eye Of The Storm* on the strength of the prototype before the studio fell in with 2K. The latter explained the difficulty of greenlighting a new IP, but was impressed enough by

Yager's tech to suggest that it pitch for the *Spec Ops* title the publisher had already greenlit.

"We had a few other prototypes," Ullmann says. "They liked the cover system from *Eye Of The Storm*, but they also liked the verticality of a game we were describing as *Vertical War*, and all that made it into the *Spec Ops* pitch and final game. *Spec Ops* was our last chance; if we hadn't sold 2K on it, we'd have closed in 2006."

As the project grew, so did the team. "We had to identify what Yager stands for," says Ullmann. "How do we be professional? How do we hire the right team? I stopped programming, we hired a HR manager, and all of a sudden four of the five of us had moved away from hands-on

development to take on roles that are more about management. Only Mathias was still hands-on as the art director. Realising that we needed real management to run a project was a huge revelation to us and we made a lot of mistakes in the beginning."

2K was supportive during Yager's learning process, as the newly formed international team set about pushing the limits of Unreal and the game's narrative. "Pushing the technology is still one of our core principles," says Ullmann. "It's in our genes! But even that can get you in trouble – while we were developing *Spec Ops*, we were checking out new technology and it slowed us down. But really we were trying to grab people's emotions and that's something we learned making *Spec Ops*, too. We rewrote the story so often and every change had dramatic consequences in each level. Whenever we changed the story, the dialogue needed to be changed, and that meant we had to rip open the levels to give the characters enough space to talk."

With only 12 months until release, Yager dramatically changed the game's final act. "It's not the ideal way to make a game," says Ullmann. "That was the reason *Spec Ops* took so long."

Yager's next project will be made differently, but with the same commitment to technology and narrative. "After five years of working on *Spec Ops*, maybe it's time to do something different so you don't get trapped in that box where we're just making military shooters," says Ullmann. "We still have to be commercial – we learned that the hard way – but by being independent we can live creatively and never be labelled or framed as being about a certain thing."

"What's surprising to me is that even in 2012 games like *Dishonored* and *Dragon's Dogma* proved that people are interested in new ideas. We've never had more platforms and more business models, so it's a good time for new IP. After a seven-year console lifecycle, people are longing for something new – gamers and publishers, actually – and that suits us fine." ■

"I went to GDC 2005 and I knew if I didn't come back with a deal then the lights would go out"



Q&A

Timo Ullmann

Co-founder and managing director



Would it be possible for five friends to build a major game studio from scratch in the modern era?

I think it's becoming more possible. There was a time when I thought we were lucky we founded the studio when we did – our biggest expenditure back in 1998 was on train tickets around Europe. But with new platforms, and the opportunity to release on Steam and entirely avoid becoming involved with a publisher, I think it may be possible again. You would have to do your own marketing, but it's much more possible than it was a few years ago when all we had were closed consoles and handhelds.

How do you feel about the popularity of consoles in Germany these days?

I think Germany has a very strong PC heritage, but at Yager we understood ourselves to be console developers from the very beginning. We thought we would work on the Dreamcast, but instead ended up on Xbox, and these days most of our *Spec Ops* team ended up playing the game on 360 or PlayStation. The international market was important to us right from the beginning and we didn't just want to be PC developers. That the consoles are much more popular was a good thing for us as a studio, because there was money to be made; it's funny, because the PC version of *Spec Ops* was considered a 'nice to have' option. But

that's going to change. With free-to-play and digital platforms coming on so strong, you can't just say 'OK, all our money's in the console space' any more.

How did Yager's international recruitment drive affect the culture at the studio?

I think we got much more open-minded. As a pure German team, we wouldn't have been able to make a title like *Spec Ops*. There are so many subtle cultural differences between us and the Americans, for instance. Germans are a lot more sensitive to violence but much less sensitive to nudity; Americans tend to get freaked out by the sight of nude breasts but never censor violence. Within the studio, we were creatively fighting with one another about how explicit we wanted to go with the violence, and that helped us nail the tone of *Spec Ops*. Multiple perspectives are to your advantage when you're making an international game... It's important we have an experienced and creative group who can work together and argue about things – that's what makes the game better.

Is it true you implemented basic switches in the code to turn off various kinds of violence?

Yes. Being German, we so wanted the game to be sold in Germany, so we had preparations in place in case our discussions with the USK didn't go as we'd hoped. That's important for Australia, too, which is also very sensitive to violence. Luckily, we didn't have to use the switches in any region. The USK took into account the context of the violence – that it has an effect on Walker – and said it was necessary to the game.



Yager's third office is an expansive open-plan space. Only the animation team get their own room, used for impromptu motion capture studies

THE MAKING OF...

Hotline Miami

How a Swedish top-down murder simulator turned the debate about videogame violence upside down



Hotline Miami's cover art was upfront about the '80s exploitation vibe. But the shocking thing was how the game itself challenged our acceptance of videogame violence

Format PC
Publisher Devolver Digital
Developer Dennaton Games
Origin Sweden
Debut 2012

Hotline Miami – a deliriously violent videogame that stood out in a year full of assassins, exotic ways to cause harm and elaborate gunplay – asks players a searching question: do you like hurting people? Heads are crushed with bats, throats are slit with kitchen knives and machine guns bullets cause arterial rain to spatter across living room carpets and ramshackle tenement stairwells. Sometimes a dying bad guy will crawl around on his hands and knees, blindly bumping into the walls for a while. And you may not even care enough to put him out of his misery.

At the end of each mission, you walk back to your car, retracing your bloody footsteps through the building you've just painted red. As you pass each mangled corpse, you're forced to witness the carnage that you're responsible for. It's grim, disturbing and not a little nauseating (even the silent protagonist, dubbed 'The Jacket' by fans, pukes after the first mission). So the question, as posed in surreal cutscenes by the game's animal-masked puppet masters, lingers: do you like hurting other people? And if you don't, why are you still playing?

Hotline Miami is provocative in its attempt to question our attitudes to simulated mass murder. Yet despite being released just before the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings, it's managed to avoid being dragged into the current round of tabloid outrage over videogame violence. Instead, its impact has been confined to gamers and the game industry itself. Which is pretty much how two-man Swedish developer Dennaton planned it.

"We wanted it to be disturbing and we wanted people to feel the violence," says graphic artist

Dennis Wedin. "But we weren't

afraid about it being controversial, because it's pixel art. If we'd made it in 3D and very realistic then it might have been different. But the graphics keep the game out of the spotlight. At Gamescom, they had to rate all the games, so two people came over and played it. And they gave it a 12, I think, because the graphics are so colourful."

His partner, well-known freeware developer **Jonatan Söderström** (AKA Cactus), agrees: "We wanted to show that we were self-conscious about the kind of game we were making." How ironic, then, that *Hotline Miami* began as the most violent, least self-conscious game imaginable.

Some people make games. Some people craft games. Some people churn out games like a one-

man production facility. Ever since he started releasing freeware games in 2004, Söderström has fallen into the latter category, firing out new titles at the rate of M60 ammo rounds. And inspired by everyone from Japanese developer Ikiki to novelists such as William Burroughs, his output has often been avant-garde.

Super Carnage was a game he started working on back in 2004 when he was 18: a top-down shoot 'em up in which the aim was simply to kill as many people as possible. It was a teenage boy's game: sick and violent, and little more than that. After struggling with the AI's pathfinding, though, Söderström filed the game in the 'unfinished and unreleased' box and went to work on other things.

It might have stayed unfinished if Söderström hadn't met Dennis Wedin, singer and keyboard player in metalcore band Fucking Werewolf Asso. They collaborated on a promo game based on the band (a psychedelic, punk 8bit outing named *Keyboard Drumset Fucking Werewolf*) and an unfinished game called *Life/Death/Island* that grew too big for them to handle.

Running out of money and with bills to pay, they decided the next game would be their first commercial release. Flicking through Söderström's collection of unfinished prototypes, Wedin came across *Super Carnage* and instantly saw its potential. They'd spend the next nine months holed up in Wedin's apartment creating what would become *Hotline Miami*.

"It was fucking hard," recalls Wedin of going into development with no budget and no clear idea of how they'd even sell the finished product. "Some days we were so fucking tired, and we didn't know if we were going to earn anything

from this game or if anyone was even going to play it. But we always loved playing it. As soon as I made some graphics, and we put them in, and tried it out, it felt so good... and all the motivation was back."

While the core gameplay of *Hotline Miami* owed much to *Super Carnage*, there was a big change. Before they started development, Söderström and Wedin hung out watching movies for inspiration. Among them were vigilante superhero adventure Kick-Ass, Miami-set drugs documentary Cocaine Cowboys and Drive, Nicolas Winding Refn's neon-tinged, bubblegum pop-scored thriller about a Hollywood stuntman who gets caught up in a heist gone wrong.

Raising questions about screen violence, *Drive* was a movie with smarts. It got Söderström and Wedin thinking: what if a videogame could do something similar? What if *Super Carnage* wasn't merely a game in which you killed people, but a game that posed questions about what it meant to kill people in a game?

Layering on a surreal narrative full of flashbacks and cutscenes featuring men in animal masks, *Hotline Miami* turned its violent game design into something more than the sum of its parts. "Me, I'm into games that are just games," explains Wedin. "But Jonatan thinks a lot about how he wants the player to think about the game. He believes the game should leave something with the player when they stop playing."

Like all Söderström's releases, *Hotline Miami* was put together using GameMaker, YoYo Games' development toolkit. "One of the reasons I don't move on from GameMaker is that there are very few tools that allow you to make games as fast," he explains. "It's very easy to use and you can code pretty sloppily in it. It gives you a lot of pre-built-in functions and tools that you'd have to invest a lot of time in making yourself if you used another engine."

There is a downside to the flexibility and speed that GameMaker offers, though. "It's a lot slower than most other engines, where you can use the hardware a lot more efficiently. And you can't do whatever you want, because you are limited to what GameMaker was designed for, which is mostly 2D games. It doesn't have support for shaders or stuff like that – at least not in the version I'm using."

Using an older version of the software threw up other issues that didn't become apparent until after *Hotline Miami's* release, such as the troublesome fact that certain printers would stop the game from running correctly. "A lot of strange things happened after we released the game. I guess most of it has been fixed in the new version of GameMaker. But we're still using the old version that wasn't really built for the newer operating systems."

For the dev team, though, the biggest challenge was creating the enemy AI. *Hotline Miami* is a game that requires you to kill or be killed. Its fast-paced instadeath design demands that its enemies are worthy adversaries. There are various AI behaviours in the game, such as random enemies that move between rooms armed with guns, or patrolling enemies who don't respond to gunfire, but will shoot at you if you're

spotted. Each enemy is also capable of switching behaviours to give a sense of variety.

Some players found the enemies' uniform appearance and switching behaviour confusing, fuelling suggestions that the AI was broken, because the bad guys didn't always respond to gunfire or chase you.

"It was intentional!" laughs Wedin. "The game is mainly a puzzle game. It's not a *Metal Gear* sneaking game. If enemies reacted to the gunshots and bodies, they would destroy the puzzles in the room. All the rooms are designed so that there are a few ways to enter the room and solve the puzzle. But if you just started shooting outside the room and they all came running out, you'd just destroy that."

In other words, more believable AI would have resulted in a less enjoyable game. "If you added those elements to the AI, the suspense and waiting element would be gone," Wedin adds. "It would turn into a corridor shooter like *Loaded* or something."

Proper planning and preparation, as any British Army squaddie will tell you, prevents piss-poor performance. In *Hotline Miami* the 'seven Ps' help keep you alive. On every mission, it's the lulls that matter, as you linger outside doors and plan how you're going to storm inside and absolutely, positively kill everyone in that room.

Which guy should you take down first? Which weapon is best suited to the room's goons? Baseball bat or shotgun? Stealth approach or kamikaze death run? Meanwhile, the game's hypnotic electronic soundtrack, featuring music from MOON, Scattle and Perturbator, pulses on, prefiguring the revelation that this is all a feverish nightmare straight out of the David Lynch mould. And those surreal and menacing cutscenes show your hitman meeting masked figures in dingy rooms, who quiz him about his motivation, asking: "Do you like hurting other people?"

It seems like a question worth asking of the developers themselves. "No," they respond in eerie overlapping synchronicity in our Skype conference call. "But we do like violent games," Wedin laughs. "That is the main question for the game: do you like violence? Do you like violent games? Why do you like violent games?"

It's a question that, on one level, *Hotline Miami* embodies the answer to: its fast-paced, adrenalin-charged gameplay distils pure, gut-level thrills into an addictive package. Yet the more you enjoy the game, the more troubling it becomes. Why are you taking pleasure from what is,

Q&A

MOON
Musician



Hotline Miami uses several tracks you wrote before the game was made. Where are they from, and what were you aiming for?

The tracks are from my first EP, and that was really me trying to put the best representation of myself as an artist out there as I could. I was trying to imagine what it would feel like to be floating in space, surrounded by elements of sound all working and moving together. Everything I do is centred around Ableton Live, but to create the sounds I mainly use a Waldorf Blofeld synthesiser. Typically games have a very synthetic, digital sound to them and that's how most of my music sounds in the end.

What makes your tracks work so well in the context of Hotline Miami's action?

I think it works because the atmosphere of the game translates very well with the atmosphere of the music; that is, tension, going from high energy to low, and evolving over time.

What has being included in Hotline Miami's soundtrack meant for you?

It's opened me up to a huge audience of people who most likely wouldn't have heard my music otherwise. And it has led to some interesting opportunities. I can't talk about most of the stuff I'm working on right now actually, because it isn't set in stone, but I will be doing an original soundtrack for a game.

essentially, a nihilistic murder simulator? Even within the context of the game, there are no justifications for your actions. It's simply violence for the sake of violence.

"We didn't want the player to have a purpose for hurting people," explains Wedin. "There's no girlfriend that's been kidnapped, or president, or a country in need or anything. It's just some weird phone calls you get that make you go and kill. Most games these days try to make it legit to kill enemies. You don't do it because you're bad. You do it to save a person or do something good. We didn't want that for our game."

"The game is a slap in the face," Wedin continues. "A lot of players get angry with the ending – especially when they unlock the second ending and it doesn't give them anything more."

Despite such frustrations, *Hotline Miami* quickly made friends. The team at Vlambeer, creator of *Super Crate Box*, sent a copy to publisher Devolver Digital, which knew of Söderström and Wedin, and was intrigued that they were making the jump into the commercial sphere.

"I had no idea what kind of game was going to drop into our lap at that point," says project manager **Graeme Struthers**. "When I got my build, I was just so happy. The music and the colour palette – it all just really came together for me in one magic burst of pixel joy. I didn't connect with feeling queasy or worried by the violence, let alone thinking about the underlying story. I was just having a blast."

Devolver took the game to the inaugural Rezzed expo in Brighton, where it won Game Of The Show. "I had the buzz of watching the awareness of the game spread around that show and people just playing, smiling and enjoying," remembers Struthers. "It honestly never crossed our mind that the game's take on violence and the actual brutality of the game could be an issue. I thought Dennis and Jonatan produced a game of such perfect poise within such a tight universe that they had already given context to what was going on, and that people would get where they were coming from."

By the end of February this year, *Hotline Miami's* critical success had morphed into hard sales, with just over 300,000 copies bought on PC, despite having been heavily pirated. That's a success in any indie's book, but Dennaton's overheads are so low that it's made the game's poverty-stricken nine-month development more than worthwhile – both creatively and financially. "We can make more games and have money to spare," says Söderström.

Still, the sudden influx of cash has been slightly surreal for the pair. "I'm not really used to having money to spend. I'm just not that materialistic, I guess," continues the coder, who doesn't own a HD TV, a decent stereo or even a current-gen console. "I am used to eating cheap noodles and fish sticks. And that hasn't really changed yet."

For the game's release party at Wedin's apartment, the frugal pair went to the local store to buy booze and emerged with three beers each. "We were like, 'Why didn't we buy a lot of beer so we could have a really big party?' It's just really hard to change your pattern."

With *Hotline Miami's* follow-up already in development, the future for Dennaton Games looks financially secure. Meanwhile, a separate team has been working on porting the original into a new engine for a Vita and PS3 release. "It will be cool to have a game on a console. It will be a dream come true," says Wedin. "If you have played games your whole life, to actually have a game released on a console is kick ass." Now all Söderström needs to do is buy himself one. ■



LEFT + ABOVE *Hotline Miami*'s animal masks add to its surreal vibe and their powers give you a reason to replay the levels. Hollow eye sockets are a recurring feature of these haunting guises. BELOW Wedin gives a thumbs up to "a bit of the old ultra-violence" while shooting the trailer, which featured the pig butcher mask, dubbed Aubrey



Hotline to Japan

Ikiki is a prolific, though little-known, Japanese indie developer who's been cranking out ultraviolent freeware titles for the last ten years or so. Packed with bloodshed and (frequently naked) ninjas, Ikiki's games have a reputation for juxtaposing simplistic, retro looks with punishing gameplay. Jonatan Söderström confesses to being a big fan, and cites Ikiki's 2D naked ninja platformer *Nikujin* as an influence on *Hotline Miami*'s combination of stealthy patience and berserker action. "Nikujin had really good flow," he says. "In the beginning it might take you five minutes to get through a level, but when you had it down it would take, like, 30 seconds. You could pretty much speed run every level once you knew where the enemies were and the obstacles and everything. It was mastering the controls and figuring out how everything worked and about using strategy to get better at the game – not new weapons or new abilities."



The game's woozy, brash score and ammo counters complement an in-game palette that's almost as violent as the gameplay

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GALLERY

THE ART OF...

Minecraft

Deconstructing the programmed art
of Mojang's blockbuster



This article's images appear courtesy of game art site Dead End Thrills (www.deadendthrills.com)

The faceless quality of individual *Minecraft* blocks makes them a versatile medium for countless digital artists. Texture packs and lighting mods can augment a look, but there's an art to the cubes themselves



CREATE GALLERY

Q&A

Jens Bergensten
lead developer

Markus Toivonen
art director



When you look at the work of Sean Kenney, Nathan Sawaya, or any Lego sculptor, you seldom consider the art of making the bricks. The same goes for the WesterosCraft server, a mindboggling attempt to build the world of Game Of Thrones in *Minecraft*. But with all its 'promotional' shots exported from the game and rendered in dedicated software, and the blocks wrapped in custom textures, it's easy to forget that Mojang even has artists of its own.

The argument, of course, is that Mojang is all artists, just as *Minecraft* is all art. The way it 'meshes' voxels into polygons, inspired by Zachtronics Industries' *Infiniminer*, is no less a work of art than any texture. And the anonymity of a single *Minecraft* block is one of the most important artistic decisions a game has ever taken. With that in mind, we ask lead developer **Jens Bergensten** and artist **Markus 'Junkboy' Toivonen** to take us back to basics.

Was *Minecraft* 'art directed' in the traditional sense? How much artistic sensibility went into it, as opposed to 'programmer art'?

Jens Bergensten No, it was programmer's art on top of more programmer's art. Notch and I had slightly different drawing styles, so recently I've been trying to adjust some pieces to look more coherent, but it's still programmer's art. We've [talked] many times about letting someone 'fix' the artwork in the game, for example someone like Junkboy, but it's been much talking and little doing.

***Infiniminer* aside, were you harking back to any other particular type of game?**

JB I think we both were inspired by PC games from the '90s, such as *Eye Of The Beholder*.

Does it amuse you to see the 'realism' mods that appear, with all their motion blur, depth of field and lens flare effects?

JB Yeah, they're cool, but not really something we aim for right now. I don't like the HD texture packs, because it makes the game feel even blockier. When the textures get more detailed, it becomes harder to use blocks 'out of context', such as pretending a black wool block is asphalt. However, a lot of the 32x32 texture packs look really good.

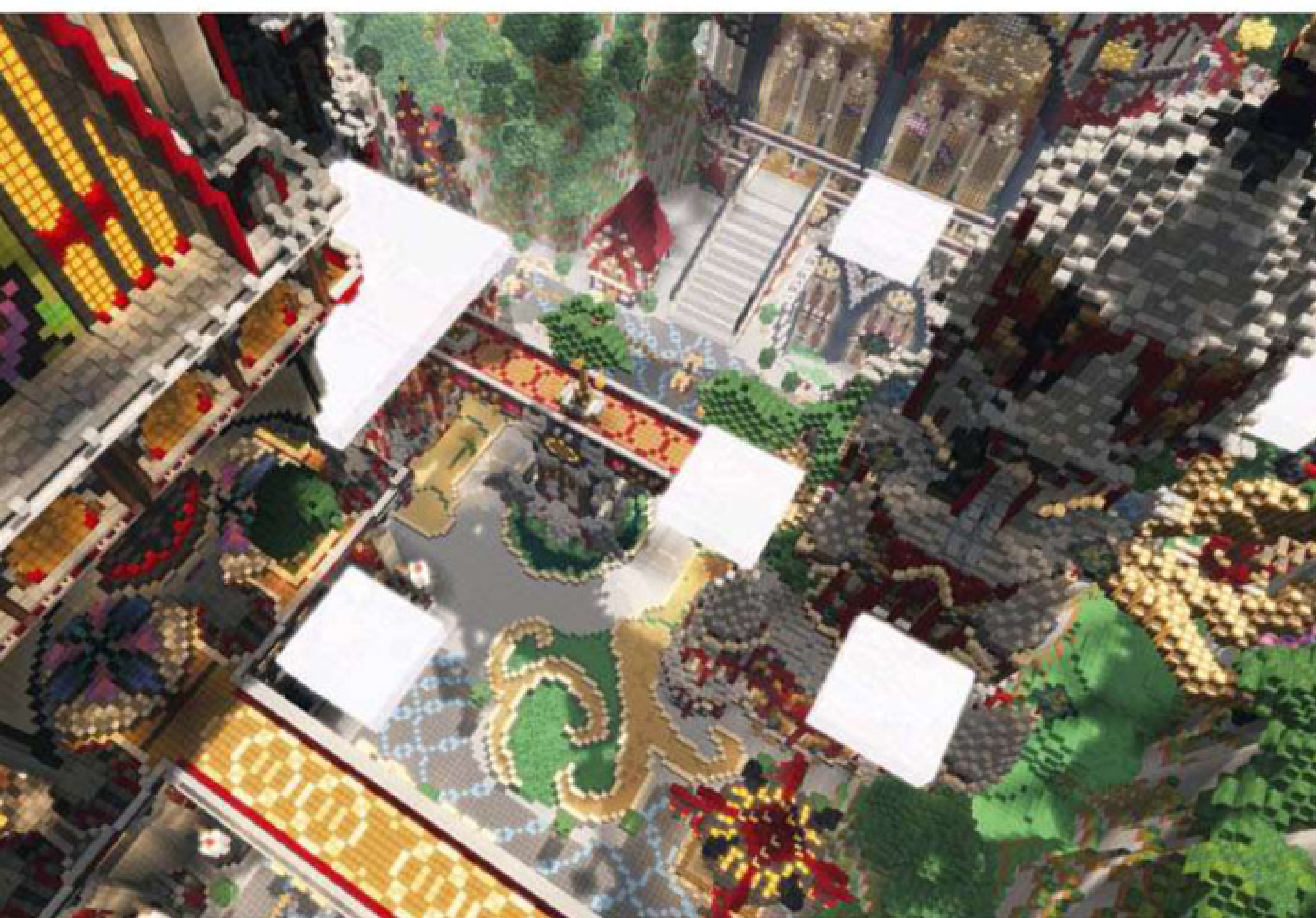
What prompted the addition of clouds? Were there many versions of the effect?

JB The clouds were added before I started working on *Minecraft*, but many details are intended to make the world feel believable. Clouds [are] a natural concept and come quickly to mind. I'm not aware of any other cloud designs, but I think they got their look



The sheer scope of some Bagdala projects last August, including a large-scale construction of the Game of Thrones world, was a testament to the game's creative potential. It's a testament to the game's creative potential. It's a testament to the game's creative potential.





both because of simplicity and of the 'blockiness' being a *Minecraft* gimmick.

How much did the game's blend of voxels and polygons determine how it looked? Was it important to let that happen?

JB Kids often ask me why everything is box-shaped in *Minecraft*, and the answer is simply that it's the simplest shape. It has surely determined the looks of the game, and it has been important, but out of necessity rather than strategy. This decision has also made it easier to work on features without worrying about an assets pipeline.

Which community maps most impress you?

JB Oh, that's hard to pick. The construction of the *Game Of Thrones* cities is very impressive, but so are the custom maps that use a lot of redstone and triggers.

Simply speaking, what's the key to making an attractive procedurally-generated world?

JB Make things coherent and believable. You wouldn't add high-polygon character models to a world of blocks, just as you wouldn't add a cartoon character to a world that looked fully realistic. Well, unless that's your gimmick...

The character concept art is more detailed and 'Lego-like' than the final models. Was the game more detailed at one point?

JB This was an experiment [in working] together with another indie game developer, Hayden Scott-Baron, but Notch decided to continue with his own designs instead. I don't think these ever got into the game, but I'm not sure.

How do you handle all the *Minecraft* merchandise design? Is it done in-house?

Markus Toivonen We're working with several merchandise partners, such as J!NX and ThinkGeek. They pitch us things, which we approve or not based on a very advanced Turing-esque algorithm. In rare cases, we'll come up with our own ideas.

What are the 'rules' for that merchandise? Are there any in particular?

MT Basically, we want the products to be unique and somehow feel related to *Minecraft* as an experience, and not just a bunch of generic bedsheets, lunch boxes and T-shirts with the logo slapped on them. Visually, we try not to deviate too much from how the game actually looks; I think there's a certain charm with these blocky items brought into the real world. ■

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

Between the pitch and the payoff

Perception is everything in the entertainment business. Customers often buy into a product or an idea for reasons of belief or social judgement – for fashionability. They get excited by what the product represents, the kind of story that it and its creator seem to tell, and they are likely to buy in if the story resonates with something in which they already believe. This is called a marketing story.

To sell games, a marketing story is often essential. The game needs to stand for something, and also to have a great storyteller who embodies the mission that the game represents. Otherwise it falls into the trap of being just a game, a thing played to pass the time. That's why many of the industry's most notable figures are also great speakers, from Jane McGonigal to Peter Molyneux, or writers or stage presences. They are experts at finding that inspiring tone about the future of games and, like preachers, they spread their gospel to journalists, bloggers and tweeters. Those in turn repeat the tale through magazines, viral videos and social networks, and the stories that resonate spread. This leads to sales.

A common marketing story is 'games must grow up' and it's simple to tell. Hark, the storyteller cries, how long have games been trapped in the boy-fuelled world of shooting and explosions? How long will games stay focused on menial tasks and functional fun? When shall we have meaning? And then they proceed to show a game that (supposedly) answers those cries.

This evangel was recently repeated by David Cage at the DICE Summit, and contained all of the above. In a speech, he enumerated nine reasons why games had to grow up, sparking a flurry of debate online. By telling this tale of woe, Cage can then segue into *Beyond: Two Souls* and thus claim to bring meaning. And, not to be unfair to Cage in particular, so do many others.

The problem is that the premise of the grow up story is false. In the cold light of day, most strongly narrativised games are poor. They may be well written, acted and voiced (such as *The Walking Dead*). They may be funny (such as Tim Schafer or Ron Gilbert's work). They may even be poignant (such as searching for Jason in *Heavy Rain*) or evoke a series of emotions.



The premise of the grow up story is false. In the cold light of day, most strongly narrativised games are poor

But in the mid-game, when the story isn't at a crucial point, they are weak. There's a lot of wandering around. There are forced puzzles whose purpose is to throttle play so that the player doesn't burn through all the content in ten minutes. There's just a lack of robust action in the game that reflects the choices that the player wants to make. And then there's the problem of cleverness.

A common feature of these self-consciously meaningful games is that they push the player into false choices or operatic reveals, such as offering two options which lead to the same outcome, or dramatically revealing that the player was the bad guy all along. These kinds of parlour tricks wear thin after you see them in a couple of games because all they do is subvert the existing player/

game relationship. In other words, the grow up pitch may be inspiring, but the payoff is poor. The game may sell a lot, but is quickly forgotten, reminisced, or retconned in review articles using the words 'promise' and 'disappointment'. And yet the story continues to work. Why?

Nobody in the music industry is vexed by the idea that music needs to grow up, yet there is plenty of immature music out there. Nobody in the gallery world tortures themselves over whether the objects they hang on their walls match up to some cultural scale. Few in the TV trade are worried about what the entirety of television is supposed to mean. But in games, all of these validation issues exist, and that is what the grow up story latches onto. It taps into a feeling that games should move on, be taken seriously by the powers that be and otherwise be judged good. We gamers tend to be institutionalists ('art is judged art by a selected art world') so we're always looking for validation.

We need to become functionalists ('art is inherently art because of a purpose it serves'). The meaning-of-the-ages stuff will look after itself if we look to ourselves and make games that work in the way that games do (agented fun). This means avoiding didactic, borrowed authorship.

Minecraft is also a game that benefits from a marketing story. It is a simulationist's wet dream, a world in which you can do anything, explore complex interactions, and create a whole virtual Westeros. It garners longterm attention because its pitch is good and its payoff is spectacular. It's built around the player rather than the game's maker, and that's why players continue to play.

Whether a game continues to be played long after its launch is the real determinant of its impact. Six months after launch, does anyone care? Is the story mode attracting many replays by more than a small percentage of its audience? Did it really prove as engaging as its pitch promised?

While the grow up story may drive many sales, it has little impact in changing games. Games are not more grown up now today than they ever were, because that whole question is badly framed. Ultimately, grow up games are not as meaningful as they hope to be, merely clever.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com

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CLINT HOCKING

The misery of compulsion

For the most part I feel like I don't have enough time to play all the games I need to play – never mind the games I want to play. With work and family commitments and the general nuisances of banking, laundry, groceries and the need to sleep, it seems like I have less time now for gaming than I ever did. I played about 40 games in 2012. Probably half of those were short indie games I played for about an hour, and probably half of the rest were mobile games I played sporadically on my phone or tablet. Of the ten or so 'long-format' games I played, most of them only lasted one or two nights. I think I only finished three of them. These are all numbers that I would like to increase in 2013, and the good news is that I am already ahead of pace.

But in conducting my 'year-in-review', there is one number that stands as a bizarre outlier. There is one game I played for longer than all of the other 39 games combined. The sad thing is, I don't even think I really like this game. The idea of playing it fills me with dread. Meanwhile, the stack of games I need to play (and indeed, would rather play) continues to grow. I am not going to name this game, because it doesn't much matter for the purposes of this column. Whether it is a Facebook game, an indie game, a triple-A console game, an MMOG, or an iPhone game is immaterial, because I have had this problem before with games of all kinds. The problem I have with the game does not stem from its genre or platform, but rather from certain elements of the design of the game, which compel me to return to it night after night, even when I would prefer to play something else.

But even a negative experience can be a learning experience. As the weeks and months wore on and I found myself going back to the game again and again – feeling sadder and sadder each time – I began to realise that I was not enjoying myself. It occurred to me then that it might be worthwhile to examine the elements of the game that were compelling me to continue playing despite how I was feeling about it. Identifying the design elements that were fostering these feelings would help me avoid similar designs in the future.



Playing the game becomes a Sisyphean task. When I sit down to play, I want to feel as though I have progressed

After consideration, it seems to me that there are two principal factors in the design of the game that work to keep me coming back despite the fact that it makes me less happy to do so. The first is that game 'loads' me. By this I mean that for everything I accomplish, I find there are half a dozen more things that I need to do. Every task begets five new tasks, every adventure unveils five more, and every objective completed leaves me with five new objectives still to be completed. While this certainly belies the incredible breadth of the game – which is appealing to me – the problem is that it creates anxiety. Playing the game becomes a Sisyphean task. When I sit down to play, I want to feel as though I have progressed in the game. Yet every time I turn the

game off, I feel as though I am further in debt. While it's true that most modern games open up significantly over the first hours after starting the game, the longer this opening is sustained and the more the player is loaded with tasks the more disempowering it feels until – in my case at least – I start to feel anxious that I can't accomplish all the things I need to (never mind doing my laundry and buying groceries). Even worse, this perpetually unfolding structure leaves me with the feeling that the only way to alleviate the anxiety of having so many unfinished tasks is to buckle down and play more – which then leads to a downward spiral of negative emotions.

The second thing that contributes to and compounds the negative feelings I have is that the game places virtually no demands on my skill. There is nothing that I can 'get better at'. There is nothing in the game to learn beyond mundane elements such as controls and basic game rules. I am not challenged to try a different approach or to attempt to learn a new (player) skill, and as a consequence, there is no meaningful way for me to accelerate my progress through the game. In the interest of not 'losing me' to a competing game, there is never a skill-wall that I cannot surpass, and any blocking points simply require me to log more time doing other things and come back later. In the end, because the game demands no skill, it ultimately gives nothing back – it does not ask anything of me other than my time. And that is something I have too little of.

These two factors – an ever broadening structure that leaves me perpetually anxious, combined with a progress gate that demands time in place of skill – contribute to a game experience that I am compelled to play despite the fact that it makes me miserable. On reflection, it seems to be that this game exhibits a quality that I hear an awful lot of players praising and an awful lot of designers aspiring to imbue their games with: addictiveness. And when I get stuck in the loop of playing this game, that is what I feel like: an addict.

I hope that, as an industry, we can find nobler aspirations than this.

Clint Hocking lives in Seattle and works at Valve. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com



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RANDY SMITH

Lessons from a creative life part two

This second instalment of 'some things I've learned over years of failing and succeeding at different types of creativity' focuses more on that mystical, right-brained ability to generate imaginative new ideas.

First of all, I believe art is about true seeing. You need to scrutinise your work for clichés and replace them. Clichés are bleached of meaning by lying on the sun-scorched shores of the collective conscious for too many centuries. When we hear them, we play a bland little tape in our minds and think not at all about what the words used to mean. Clichés are vapid shortcuts – they're someone else's creativity that fits you poorly, and a lazy excuse not to be descriptive. Fresh, new combinations of words and ideas arrest the audience, catch their imagination, and lead them to envision life as you see it. Visual artists learn to distinguish between icons – the condensed, clichéd representation of something like an eye – from the forms, lines, and colours they truly perceive, which is why they practice all those crazy experiments like drawing things upside down or with the wrong hand.

Next, the substance is in the details. The meaning of your work might seem like it's found in the story, and as you get awesome at structure and theme then perhaps it is, but more likely that's just scaffolding to hang the true content from: your attention to detail. The smallest, atomic elements should be something you're passionate about and possessed to get right according to some internal compass. I didn't even try to be creative with *Spider's* story – it's *Legends Of The Fall* meets John Bellairs – but I instinctively knew what every locket, desk, and door knob *had* to look like, and it turned out those props, not the plot, hold *Spider's* true meaning.

You also need to comply with your mental state. There are times when the river flows easily, and then – for me anyway – there's mornings, when literal thought just can't happen. Sometimes I'm desperate to make progress on the game, but I know a personal to-do list will haunt me, or my instincts for as-yet-unknown reasons demand I start elsewhere in the project. Some types of creativity might come most readily when you're hyper, or miserable, or contentedly balanced, or



You need to comply with your mental state. There are times when the river flows easily, and then there's mornings

have been adventuring for weeks. Like walking an enormous dog, it's best to go with what your creative soul seems to desire rather than yanking it along by the leash.

Think laterally, too. Computer science thinks about creativity in terms of searching a giant, foggy landscape for the highest peak. If you walk directly uphill from where you start, you'll reach the top, but then you can't follow that 'go in the obvious straight line' instinct any more, and how do you know if this hill is the tallest or just a local maxima? So then computer science borrows a metaphor from metalworking called annealing, in which you repeatedly heat up the material so all the particles race around like crazy and then cool it back down in an attempt to get them to line up

like you want. Back in the foggy landscape, it's akin to sprinting drunkenly for a few minutes or parachuting in at random, after which you walk uphill again and check to see if the new peak is even better. This idea of not always following your predictable movements, of energetically moving at an acute angle, is key during a project's formative steps. I like to scramble up a session that's losing momentum by brainstorming on some tangentially related topic, or drilling down too far on a seemingly irrelevant detail, or running the thought experiment of changing some fundamental pillar such as the genre or even medium. This is also why creative tension is so effective, so collaborate with people who provide unfamiliar perspectives.

Test your audience as well. Assemble an imaginary little squadron of real people you know and theoretical people your work should appeal to – ideally being as different as possible – then imagine them each consuming it in front of you. What would this friend think? Would that type of person get it? Adjust your voice if you notice you're not reaching your intended audience.

And note that you don't really come up with great ideas in the shower. You come up with great ideas at night, then your brain tells you about them after you've been awake for a while. It's hard to cram creativity in on a deadline, because big bursts of foreground brainstorming need to be followed by the insanely productive hum of background processing that you have zero ability to control or accelerate. Foreground is like shovelling coal into the furnace, but to get to your destination you need to step away so the locomotive can run in the background.

Finally, be restless. The best art derives from some dissatisfaction: a world or thought demanding to be explored, an unbalanced ferocity toward a cosmic injustice, or the utter inability to explain something satisfactorily. Art is an inquisitive mind. Art is hungry and doesn't stay long in the comforts of home. None of us will ever encounter the end of any direction we travel, but we're counting on you to forge new trails into the frontiers that beckon you and report back on what you've observed.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style. He has also compiled his favourite songs into a mix: www.bit.ly/VgA56n

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Word Play



JAMES LEACH

The end zone

My trouble is that I don't finish enough games. I love them, I download them, I buy them and I sometimes borrow them from my friends who get them for nothing. And I play them quite a lot. But I'm a busy juggling my job, a broken boiler, the twins' school exchange trip and diarrhoea. I haven't got time to play games to completion. Also, to be honest, I'm not very good at them. Certainly not when you consider I've spent my whole professional life playing them.

Even I, though, have noticed that games have got easier as they've got more sophisticated. The real challenges lie in online gaming, where you face an army of remorseless 14-year-olds with the twitch reactions of a housefly on amphetamines. However, singleplayer games are definitely more finishable, and often shorter. So every so often I get to see the end. And it's rarely pretty.

Endings are funny things. When a book, film or even a piece of music ends, you're dumped back in the real world with the memory of what you've just experienced. Whoever created the thing that's just ended is, or should be, aware that how you feel at that moment is what you take away from it. Get the ending wrong and you devalue the effort. If the mint which comes with your after-dinner coffee contains woodlice, that's likely to be at top of mind when you recount tales of your otherwise flawless hundred-quid meal.

Games aren't like films and books, as I repeatedly say, despite comparing them all the time. Storytellers in those media just have to complete the character arc. Games cast you as the character, and, because it's you, there is no character arc. Games are about your actions and how they influence the world, enabling you to progress towards a goal. The great moments come when the posts of that goal move, or the characters you share your journey with surprise you, usually by failing to survive.

At the end of the singleplayer game, it's all about how you've changed the world. How things will be better now. You have, through your toils and possibly by watching walkthroughs on YouTube, triumphed over insurmountable odds and there's a new dawn, without crime lords, the Empire, the dude with the horns in the castle. This



We know that just winning isn't enough. The heaping up of trophies, baubles and big flipping guns is also hollow

is so unsatisfying, though. Stories, to sound quotably poncy, are about the change within. The character arc that leaves the character him or herself changed. Just changing the world and defeating everyone isn't enough. Think about it.

No matter, say the game designers. We just need to give the victorious player more rewards. All the power-ups. All the weapons. A sandbox mode. The choice to rule as good or evil. And that doesn't work either.

So what makes a good game ending? Given the freedoms you have as a player rather than a viewer, we know that just winning isn't enough. The heaping up of trophies, baubles and big flipping guns is also hollow. Emotion. That's what we need. So you get the girl. You get the feisty,

gorgeous girl who's disliked you and argued with you throughout the game! Yeah! This doesn't work because in real life you don't like the annoying cow. Plus, as a gamer, you don't like the assumption that you'd want her.

Right. Next idea. What about you get a glimpse at the amazing sequel? As you clamber to the peak of the highest mountain in your kingdom to survey the land, you see, in the hazy distance, another peak, belching fire. Out of it is pouring an ominously chanting army of slightly taller enemies, some driving half-tracks. Huh. This doesn't work. Not only is it a thinly-veiled advert for the next game, but the one thing you don't feel like doing is fighting an even tougher horde of orcs armed with laser RPGs. Plus, the next game will be three years away and you know they haven't started on it yet, so what you're seeing will bear no resemblance to what might be in it.

Any more ideas? How about the twist in the tail? The major reveal that indicates you were fighting for the government all along! When you washed up at that dock with your brain wiped of all memory and tattooed only with barcodes and detailed instructions on how to hotwire a Fiat 500, it wasn't a stag-night prank! You were meant to fight the regime, destroy the ruling elite and shoot the red barrels in that steelworks! You weren't sticking it to the man – you were the man. How's that for an ending? No. Twists are nice, but as a player you want to react to them, not find them out at the end. Games aren't passive. What you experience should inform how you feel as you continue to play and a shock reveal doesn't do that because you're done playing. Sorry.

Here's what I think might make a good ending. After investing so much time and effort in the game, you should feel close to the characters and involved in the story. You find out how being with you has changed them. There are your character arcs. And then they go on without you. You feel the satisfaction of not being tricked, of seeing what they've become, and most importantly you'll miss them. It should amplify the real sense of loss you feel when you finish a game and it leaves your life.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online



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Region Specific: Finland

It's a time of rapid growth and diversification for the Finnish industry

Finland's game industry has long been assured in its ability to craft world-class titles, but its voracious expansion has started bringing its companies to the world stage as well. External and internal investment has seen the number of studios here double, and the general public has become proud of their home-grown successes. More seem to be on the way. The region's long-serving Housemarque ① (p160) is applying its hard-won knowledge to make iOS games that avoid frustrating players, and Nitro Games ② (p162) is working on bringing console-quality strategy games to tablets. Redlynx's ③ (p164) exquisite bike physics still dominate XBLA, but now they're returning to PC in *Trials Evolution: Gold Edition*. Remedy ④ (p166) is transforming itself from a console and PC juggernaut to a more lithe studio. Rovio ⑤ (p168) has spread its angry wings and is repositioning itself as a media entertainment company, while Sulake ⑥ (p170) is turning its popular social network, Habbo, into a game platform. Supercell ⑦ (p172) is showing Zynga how social farming should be done and rivalling Rovio's iOS performance with *Hay Day* and *Clash Of Clans*. Meanwhile, Umbra's ⑧ (p174) tech is enabling ever-greater graphical feats, and Joensuu Science Park ⑨ (p176) runs an incubator that's helping to fuel a raft of new studios.





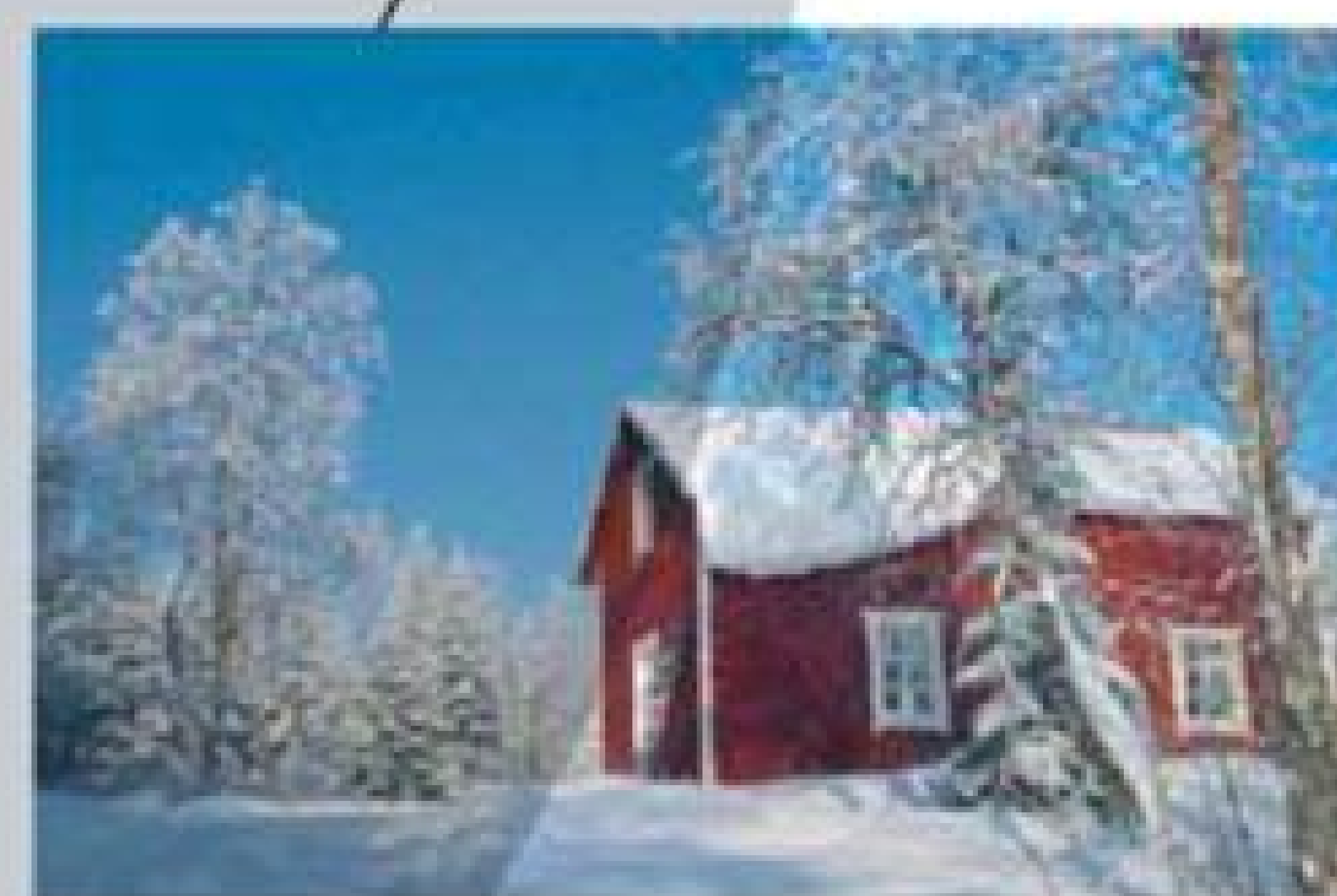
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2

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The Northern European gaming hub with international ambition



3

5



4



LANDMARKS

- 1 Helsinki lends its name to the capital region, which also includes Espoo, Vantaa and Kauniainen.
- 2 Finlandia Hall is a modern events venue.
- 3 Finland's renowned for cold winters. You can sometimes see the Aurora Borealis in Helsinki.
- 4 An idyllic scene from Nuuksio National Park in Espoo.
- 5 Helsinki Cathedral's neoclassic spires are a highlight of the capital's centre

Last time we were in Finland, we found a development scene supremely confident in its output, yet retiringly shy where its identity was concerned. Finland's small population and associated lack of a substantial domestic marketplace had resulted in companies with global ambitions and a natural understanding of international appeal. Redlynx had become a poster child for XBLA with its exceptional but brutal *Trials HD*. In *Max Payne* and *Alan Wake*, Remedy Entertainment had shown its mastery of atmosphere, winning it fans across the globe. Housemarque – one of the oldest developers in Finland – had resuscitated Amiga-era hardcore twitch action with *Super Stardust HD*. And a growing company called Rovio had struck mobile gaming gold with *Angry Birds*. But despite numerous success stories like these, and a history reaching back 20 years to a fertile demo scene, Finland's industry remained stubbornly off the map.

That's now changing. Those same companies have grown at a rapid pace, some through outside investment – Ubisoft's acquisition of Redlynx in 2011, for instance – and others through savvy marketing. Rovio leads the way in the latter respect, having escaped its digital aviary to find new homes in the cinema (the *Angry Birds* film's due in 2016), toy shops and even on the side of soft drinks. And Finland's growing studios have been joined by a new generation of startups inspired by their success.

There are some 150 game companies in the region now, and around 40 per cent of those are startups. Companies such as Mental Moustache and Tripworks, which are building iOS platformers and tablet-based educational games respectively, represent a new guard hoping to replicate the growth of the veteran companies here. And while attributing overnight success to any company is more often than not a gross oversimplification (Rovio, remember, made 51 games before *Angry Birds* catapulted it onto the global stage), Supercell has come pretty close, given it was only founded in 2010 and is now causing a storm on iOS with *Hay Day* and *Clash Of Clans*.

Finland's capital region is made up of the cities of Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa, along with Kauniainen and other nearby commuter towns. As you'd expect, the majority of the country's developers have taken up residence here, predominantly in Helsinki and Espoo, but its regional areas are enjoying rapid growth, too. This is in part down to Finland's game education gravitating to the east of the country, away from



While perhaps the stereotypical view of Finland, don't forget that days can last for up to 19 hours in the summer months

the more centralised capital – an issue that's discussed in our roundtable on p156 – providing breathing space for talented graduates to set up their own companies away from the more competitive Helsinki.

There are around 150 game companies in Finland now, and around 40 per cent of those are startups... Passion and polish define Finland's gaming output

But the expansion isn't just down to geography. Finnish developers are supported by a large number of government and private organisations focused on growing what has become one of Finland's biggest export industries. This support network includes organisations such as Tekes (the Finnish funding agency for technology and innovation) as well as Neogames (centre of games business, research and development), which are both working hard to maintain the national industry's momentum. On a more local level, incubators such as Joensuu Science Park are springing up to help startups find their way – you'll find more about Joensuu on p176.

As you'd expect, this proliferation of talent hasn't gone unnoticed by Finland's capital-based larger studios. The city of Tampere (nicknamed 'the Manchester of Finland' or 'Manse' locally, due to its industrial past) has become the second-biggest game development hub in Finland, with 36 companies based there, including Rovio and Bugbear, who have both opened new studios. Oulu is the next biggest gathering of devs,

boasting 30 companies and the Oulu University Of Applied Sciences, which has forged a strong reputation among developers and hackers. Kotka, meanwhile, is close to the Russian border and home to *East India Company* developer Nitro, which has closed its Helsinki office altogether. All of this bodes well for a region looking to attract more foreign talent.

But while there are many game makers here, Finland's industry doesn't solely consist of them. Sulake, the Helsinki-based company behind teen-focused social network Habbo, is putting a difficult 2012 behind it as it pushes its new development API and game service. These, it hopes, will attract developers looking for a less crowded marketplace than Facebook's saturated, and polarised, platform. Then there's Umbra, a middleware company that specialises in occlusion culling – in layman's terms, only rendering what the player can see, not the entire environment – and whose technology is in a surprising number of games, including *Max Payne 3*, *Eve Online* and Bungie's new project, *Destiny*.

While Nokia was the face of Finland for a long time, its decline in recent years – six

consecutive loss-making quarters since Q2 2011, followed by a return to profit in Q4 2012 – has seen the game industry move into the limelight. Finland's burgeoning talent base has attracted outside parties to the country, too, with EA and Unity setting up studios in Helsinki last year.

But despite its rapid expansion, Finland's scene hasn't lost any of the inter-studio familiarity that was so striking during our last visit. While Rovio stands apart – its employee count now numbers over 500 – most studio's head counts remain fewer than 100, and none we visit have diminished in energy; nor have they lost sight of what allowed them to grow in the first place: the games. Passion and polish define Finland's gaming output, and whether it's applied to moreish bike and catapult physics, technological excellence or narrative credibility, it's all driven by an intense sense of pride over the industry's achievements. While Finland's developers have historically been unwilling to crow about such achievements to the rest of the world, it's now ready to start being heard. ■

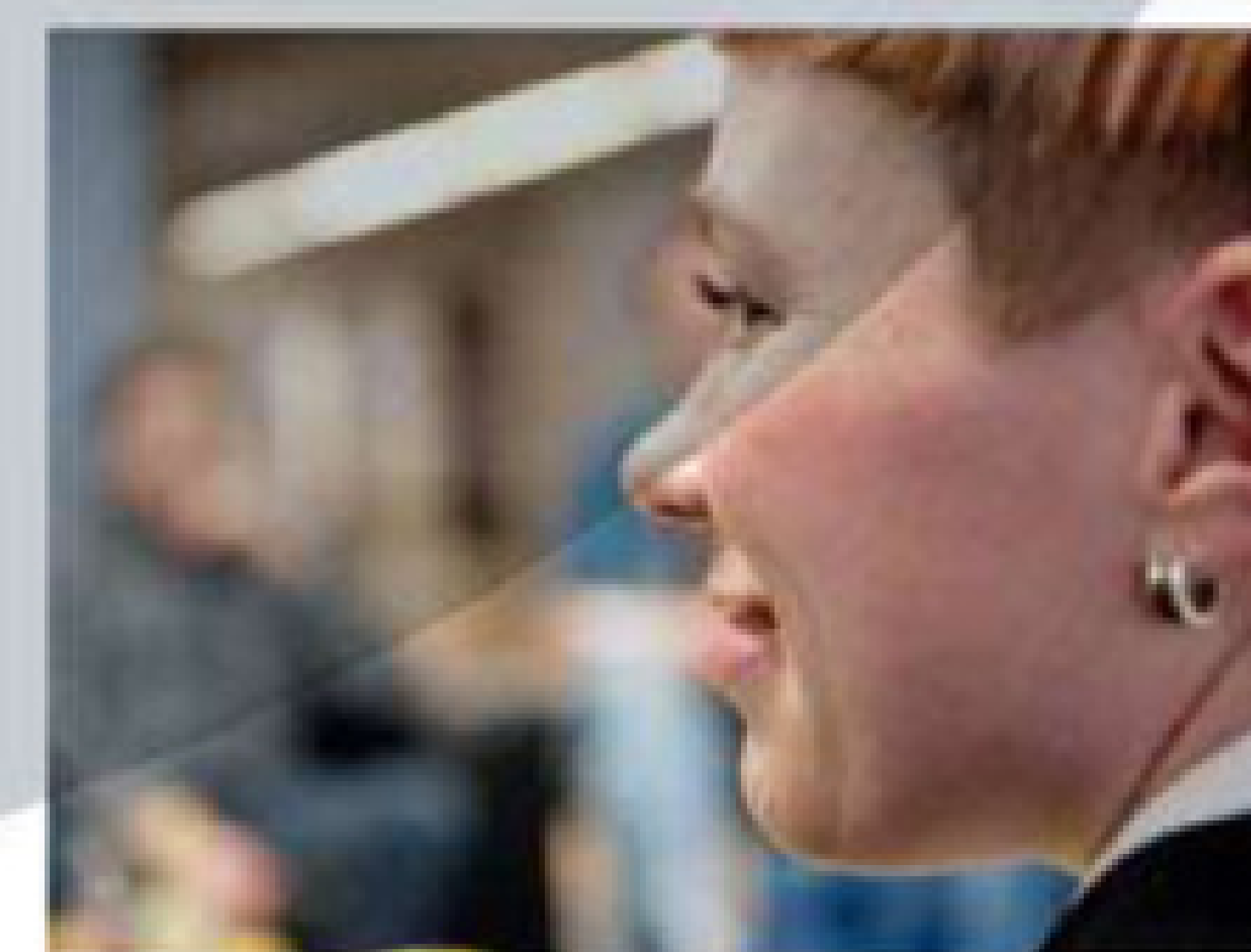
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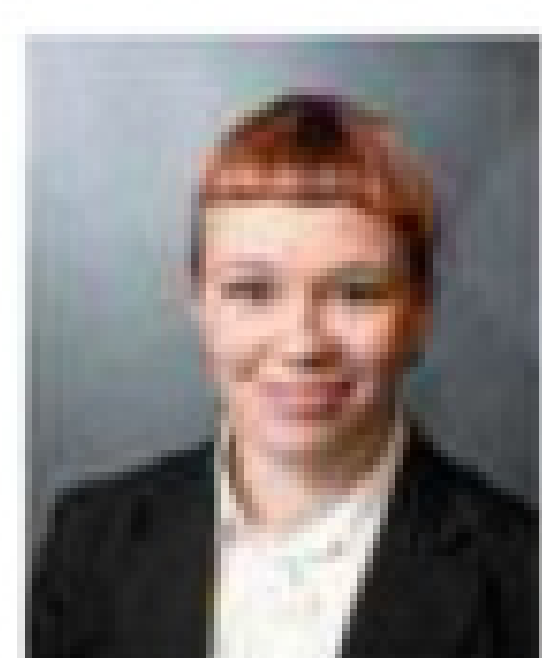
NORTH FACE TO FACE



Finnish industry luminaries discuss earning legitimacy, the state of games education and more



Tero Virtala
CEO, RedLynx



Suvi Latva
Coordinator,
Neogames



KooPee Hiltunen
Director,
Neogames



Matthew Bond
Developer,
Tripworks



Heikki Koljonen
CEO, Mental
Moustache



Otso Mäkinen
CTO, Umbra



Veikko Miettinen
Development
manager,
Joensuu
Science Park



Aki Järvilehto
Executive VP,
Remedy



Sami Lahtinen
SVP of game
development,
Rovio



Jussi Tähtinen
CEO, Nitro
Games



Mari Isbom
Senior advisor,
Tekes



Ilari Kuittinen
CEO,
Housemarque

Echoing our last visit to Helsinki nearly two years ago in **E229**, Redlynx hosts this year's well-subscribed group discussion. Those present are: Redlynx CEO **Tero Virtala**; Housemarque CEO and co-founder **Ilari Kuittinen**; Remedy executive VP **Aki Järvillehto**; Sami Lahtinen, SVP of game development at Rovio; Umbra's CTO, **Otso Mäkinen**; Joensuu Science Park development manager **Veikko Miettinen**; Mental Moustache CEO **Heikki Koljonen**; **Matthew Bond**, a developer at Tripworks; Tekes senior advisor **Mari Isbom**; Nitro CEO **Jussi Tähtinen**; and Neogames director **KooPee Hiltunen**, as well as coordinator **Suvi Latva**. It's a packed room, one where the broad span of the Finnish game industry spectrum is represented. With *Trials Evolution: Gold Edition* on the brink of release (it's due to arrive on March 22), we all settled around an aureate tablecloth and several bottles of gold-flake-filled liquor to discuss what has changed in the region since we were last here, and learn about the new challenges that rapid growth has brought.

How has the Finnish development scene grown since we were here last?

Tero Virtala In 2011, the industry was already successful, but there were big changes starting to happen – the rise of mobile, digital distribution, new business models, etc – trends that have continued globally during the past two years. Back then, there were a lot of activities happening at the grass roots level in the Finnish game industry – there were maybe 60 to 70 smaller companies and no really big companies, but some really promising growing ones like Rovio, us [Redlynx], and Remedy. Now there are 100 to 150 small companies, but there are more and more medium-sized companies and many of those early success stories have continued to grow. Rovio has had exceptional growth; Supercell too. The industry has been able to live [off] the opportunities that global development has provided.

Suvi Latva And we've had a lot of investment into the Finnish industry as well during the past two years, along with some remarkable acquisitions.

KooPee Hiltunen One of them being [Ubisoft's purchase of] Redlynx, of course.

Sami Lahtinen Kope, do you have figures on how many employees you have in the game industry here currently?

KH We don't have actual figures, but our estimate is 1,500-plus. If I were to guess, I would say that it is somewhere around 1,800 at the moment.

Otso Mäkinen Also the last year or two, one

change that's important is that the general public in Finland has recognised the videogame industry more. When I met my mother-in-law for the first time, she asked, "When are you going to get a real job?" [Laughter] Nowadays it is considered a real job to work in the game industry.

KH It's pretty hard to open an economic newspaper these days without seeing somebody from Rovio, or from Supercell, or some other company talking about the game industry, so there's definitely been a big change.

SLah It was amazing in November last year when the US top-grossing App Store list had three games in the top five from Finland!

TV It was probably ten years ago when [funding agency] Tekes started to support the small Finnish game industry, and for years Tekes was saying that we need to have a big ecosystem that has the grass-roots companies, the medium success companies, and the large companies that are internationalising the industry. Three years ago, we were starting to see this was going to happen,

"When I met my mother-in-law, she asked, "When are you going to get a real job?" Nowadays it is considered a real job to work in the game industry"

and now that ecosystem is falling into place.

Jussi Tähtinen The big success we've had throughout Finland during the past two years has changed the mentality here. Now everybody believes that small startups can actually grow fairly rapidly into something that can be the next top-grossing game creator and so on. I think that's one of the major changes that's not just in Helsinki, but the whole country – the entire ecosystem started supporting startup game companies through better education, governmental support, or whatever. It's way easier to build up the funding needed than it was, say, two years ago.

Last time we were here, there was a feeling that universities were only just beginning to turn their attention to games. How's that going?

Veikko Miettinen In the last couple of years, there have been many new schools all over Finland, but I'm a little bit worried. Companies are doing great and it's amazing that they've managed to achieve that kind of growth without the large educational basis, but what happens now? I think there are around ten game schools at the moment in Finland, but there will be a two-year gap waiting for those graduates to appear, because

they began two years ago and these courses normally take around four years. So at the moment if you are calculating the graduates per year in Finland, it's not very many. There's growth, but it's coming slowly.

Aki Järvillehto But it's better than what we had.

VM Yes, that's true!

KH It's definitely one of the things we have to work on this year, and also the coming years, because we don't only want to see the quantity of education ramp up, but also maintain its quality.

Given the distances involved, does the location of most educational facilities in the east, away from Helsinki, cause any problems?

AJ It's super-cool to see so many new education programmes being ramped up and it's great that there are a lot of smaller places that have seized the opportunity who are doing outstanding work. Yes, we need more of those everywhere, and I think there are programmes being started in the capital as well – the more the merrier.

KH I would say the main problem with regional education is that the biggest companies are in the capital area, and games education should be very hands on. If you're in regional parts of Finland, it might be that you don't have strong enough connections to game developer companies. But, of course, we are working on that and nowadays there is quite a strong game development scene in many parts of Finland, and it's growing stronger all the time.

AJ One thing to underscore: it shouldn't be a question of either/or. The quality of work Tekes and Neogames do in all regions is top notch, especially given that game development has so many different focused disciplines. The stronger centres we can have around different disciplines the better, so there's plenty of ground to cover.

Mari Isbom A lot of game companies start up around these education centres as well – the students have the skills to establish their own companies, and if there is one company, the scene grows.

JT But in general it seems to be that gaming education is very different in Finland to what we've experienced in other countries in Europe. We've had a lot of trainees from Finnish schools, ●

CREATE REGION SPECIFIC DISCUSSION

different places, and a lot of trainees from European schools. In other countries, it seems that there's more specific really high level stuff, and so they specialise a lot more. The result is that students in the fourth and perhaps third years are already pretty much industry-standard employees by that point. Whereas in Finland, it seems to be more about, 'I'm a game programmer,' or 'I'm an artist' type of thing. So we don't yet have that very specialised niche in our education and really top-notch quality on that, and I think that's something we need to work on in Finland: to get to that level and maintain it.

KH Yeah, it's definitely one of the things we have to focus on in the future: to create these kind of top skills, or give students the possibility to create and enhance these skills. It's certainly one of the topics we are discussing.

Matthew Bond As well as adding education to Helsinki, are any of you marginally larger companies considering opening offices closer to the education facilities?

SLah We did. The competition for talent acquisition in Helsinki is getting more difficult all the time. A year ago we opened a studio in Tampere and it has been a big success. We managed to ramp up [to] a studio of 30 employees in nine months. I think many companies are now considering [doing] that, too. It's a smart move to ramp up a studio anywhere.

Heikki Koljonen If you have a studio in Helsinki, most people eventually come to Helsinki and work there anyway, because no one wants to stay so far north or east! [Laughter]

TV It requires different management level as well – I think Rovio was 200 or 300 people when you set up the Tampere studio. Up to that point, you were thinking that just one place suited your needs pretty well.

JT Yes, it just adds so much management if you need to have remote locations, regardless of the distance. In the beginning, we were based both in Kotka and Helsinki, and we worked a lot with external studios outsourcing parts of development. And basically the only way we could get it to work was to take something from your internal DNA – which is the one guy who wants to move some place else – and take that guy over there and sort of bring that culture that you have and build it in. Otherwise you're going to end up with two separate teams that never really function that well together. That's the largest barrier to overcome: how to take something from one place and then make it work somewhere else.

TV The Finnish game industry has been attracting

a lot of international talent, but I think those people are still coming to the capital area. But it's been interesting to see many of our people who come from abroad actually like to arrive late October/November when it's really dark and typically depressing – they say that that's the most exotic time to come here! So maybe the next move is to go to the Arctic Circle. [Laughter]

Despite its growth, the development community here still appears to be remarkably close – it feels more like an indie collective than a group of corporations.

KH I think part of the reason for that is that we have three very active organisations in the Finnish game industry, and one of the aims of those organisations is to maintain a cooperative culture. But of course, since many people working in the game industry have been in it for years, they know each other well, so that also contributes.

SLat And the lack of a domestic market in Finland means that companies here aren't competing with each other directly, which helps to foster that cooperative spirit.

“Many of our people who come from abroad actually like to arrive late October/November when it's really dark – they say that's the most exotic time”



AJ I think there's also a strong sense that if one local company wins, everyone benefits from that. It *will* bring you more financing, and it *will* bring more interest to Finland. People will fly to meet *us* now, instead of *us* always having to fly to them.

TV It's true. In a way, there is a lot of communication, a lot of information sharing... And I think the basis is what Kope says: that some of the people here have been working ten, 15, sometimes even 20 years already, so they know each other well. Now that the industry's grown, industry-wide organisational structures are key. It's good to see newcomers joining in these events, and the government is now starting to support this structure more and more.

KH As they say, united we stand, divided we fall.

Do you think that relaxed sense of familiarity gives Finland an edge when it comes to focusing on what's important: the games?

Ilari Kuittinen We do still have secrets – in this room, only **Edge** has played our next game! [Laughter]

So you all know, it's a farming simulator with social elements. [Laughter]

IK So yeah, we don't know what other people are working on, really. Even though people know each other really well and were maybe in the same demo group 20 years ago, I don't think they share much of that kind of information.

TV Yeah, but I think that's how it should be when companies are professional. Right now, at this very moment, there are things that we're working on that cannot be shared, but a lot of the underlying knowledge – for example, the business side, different success stories, or learning from games that didn't succeed and the reason for that – can be. Many programmers here still have their own communities where they discuss certain problem areas and how they've been solving those.

JT I think it's exactly like that: a lot of the people that we're connected to seem to be very happy to share any past experiences, successes or failures, but I think it's like an unwritten rule that you don't need to talk about whatever your next big unrevealed thing is. But talk about the stuff you

have done, because it's pointless for others to repeat the same mistakes that you've made. I think that's working really well here in Finland.

AJ It's worth mentioning how active the local IGDA chapter is, too, which I believe is the most active IGDA chapter in the world. We get up to 250 people at each of the monthly meetings, and people just like to hang out and feel like they belong in a community. That's especially important for people who come from abroad, and we have a lot more people coming into Finland, so having that support network is totally critical for them.

OM Yeah, and that's one place where you see how much things have grown, because I believe I was in the very first meeting, and I think there were about ten people there!

AJ Yeah, it started with just a handful of people gathering for beers once a month, then eventually they formalised it.

KH I think actually it's the only formalised IGDA chapter outside of the USA.

Finland has long been ahead of the curve when it comes to new business and distribution models – is there a natural aptitude for adaptation here?

SLat I think that because the companies [here] are pretty small compared to international ones, it makes us more flexible. And of course, we have a pretty long history with mobile technology.

SLah Thanks to Nokia, the whole Finnish education system has been skewed towards mobile technology during the past few years and it has improved general competence in that area, which has reflected in the game industry as well. The demo scene is, of course, worth mentioning here, too, as those in it developed skills in optimising something small and beautiful, which has been key for mobile development. Maybe it's also something about the Scandinavian eye for simplicity and aesthetics that reflects in how we design games.

IK There are also historical reasons. We didn't have strong console development in the past, and there's only two companies from the '90s here in Finland! So most of the companies now were started because there were new opportunities, new channels – like Sulake's story.

TV When you consider the DNA or the mentality of the companies here, it's been very often said that Finns have always been very humble and not very good at praising themselves and shouting about successes. But maybe that humbleness allows us to look a bit more objectively at the market. Even though we've been developing



games for certain platforms for five to ten years – and consider ourselves good at it – if a project wasn't so successful, it helped us to understand that maybe we are not the best in that area, or maybe we need to change. And because companies have been fairly small, be they ten people or 100 people, if you have the motivation to change, being that size means it's still possible.

MI Every day I talk to game companies that want funding for their first or second project, but the ideas are always amazing. Everybody has a new idea, even the older companies, so this richness is amazing. But the challenge for startups is how to make a business out of it.

SLah I think the point about humbleness is true, but something has changed. I think a couple of years back companies were happy if they dominated their neighbourhood or city. And if that was the case, it was huge. But now even smaller startups start thinking about world domination right away, and have very ambitious plans. That's not very typical for us Fins.

OM There has to be something in the DNA. It's not only gaming, but Finnish engineers are very well respected in other fields as well, and I think it might have something to do with the weather. Because if you're building a house or a town, it has to withstand the winter here, otherwise you'll be dead when it comes! [Laughter] But it's true that

the feeling has changed. It's not only the engineers any more. There's lots more talk about business and how to do marketing than there used to be. It's not that many years ago that people were like, 'let's build this great [game],' but no one ever thought about how to sell it!

MB I think the Finns are all incredibly proud of anything they do as well. I'm not a Finn, but I see it every day in my workplace and in my studies: every Finn doing whatever they're doing is always incredibly proud of that, and will always push unbelievably hard to reach this level of perfection. That happens so infrequently in other places.

SLah But it's hard to believe that after the pulp and paper industry, and the Nokia era, the entertainment industry would be where Finland is doing best. It doesn't make any sense if you think about the atmosphere five years ago.

AJ Though in the context of mobile phones, gaming almost feels like a natural match.

Has Nokia's decline had any knock-on effects for the game industry here? Has it allowed the game studios here to take more of the limelight? Or have you lost a lot of support during its rough patch?

JT I think it has woken up a lot of people in Finland – even if you gain success, no matter how huge that might be, it won't necessarily last forever. You need to evolve and follow where that particular industry is going and keep yourself on the cutting edge.

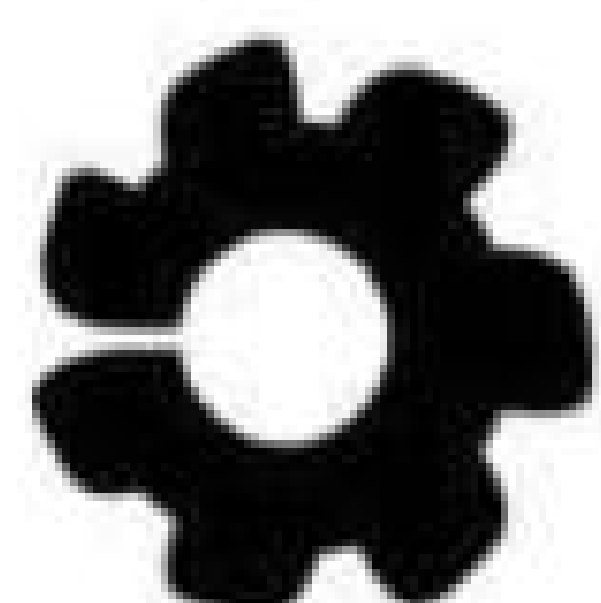
TV What happened to Nokia has been unfortunate. Nokia was very supportive of the Finnish game industry in the early 2000s and mid-2000s, when mobile gaming business did not yet have its iOS and ecosystems that allowed small developers to get into the market. But in a sense, Nokia's support allowed the industry to reach a phase where it was able to start growing without it. If Nokia had succeeded and there was that ecosystem around it, would there have been an even bigger growth factor? Perhaps, but at this point we need more and more personnel, and there is good talent coming from Nokia.

AJ But it also feels like there is something in the country's sentiment that has changed, given how just amazingly successful a phenomenon Nokia was over the years. Everyone now realises that it's up to them, and is looking in the mirror and considering how to move forward from here. And that's a positive sentiment.

KH Of course, we all hope that Nokia does well in the future, but as an industry we are no longer dependent on its success. ■

Housemarque

This long-running independent studio is still holding true to its core values



HOUSEMARQUE

Founded 1995**Location** Helsinki**Employees** 42**Key staff** Ilari Kuittinen (CEO, co-founder), Harri Tikkanen (creative director, co-founder)**URL** www.housemarque.com**Selected softography***Super Stardust Delta*, *Furmins*, *Outland*, *Dead Nation***Current projects** Three unannounced projects

Housemarque is developing a spiritual successor to *Super Stardust*, which we've sampled. As you'd expect, it's fast, busy and already polished

STUDIO
INSIGHTIlari Kuittinen
CEO and co-founder

One of the oldest developers in Finland, Housemarque clings fiercely to both its independence and a hardcore development ethos that's increasingly rare these days. Its origins in Amiga development and its clear love of twin-stick shooters have in no way clouded its view of the future, and Sony and Microsoft's next consoles will soon form the core of its strategy. We ask CEO and co-founder **Ilari Kuittinen** about the continued survival of core gamers.

Do you think the next-gen consoles can build enough momentum in the face of the smart device revolution?

I think momentum can be built up pretty fast these days, and I think it's going to take a long time for mobiles and tablets to completely replace HD couch gaming. The old-guard [hardware is] still best positioned to provide that, even though we're obviously thinking about things like

Steam Box and the microconsoles. But I think they're going to be blown away by the next-generation consoles – they're going to fix a lot of the problems that the last generation suffered from. I think Sony and Microsoft are going to make it a lot more convenient to access your games – just turn on your TV and there they are.

Is the core diminishing?

If you consider the fuss about the supposed collapse of consoles, it's mostly focused on Wii; those casual gamers that have migrated towards tablets or mobile phones are tired of playing *Wii Fit*. Some of the biggest games released last year [were] HD experiences, like *Assassin's Creed III* or *COD*. But the core has a different flavour now. It's much smaller than it used to be during, say, the Commodore 64 era. I know there are players that only play *COD* or a football game – they don't go beyond their comfort zone. But maybe those gamers are a big part of the transition. They don't need to have the next-gen stuff straight away, but maybe in three years when the prices have gone down they'll think, 'Oh, this is pretty cool.'

With a new community manager and the move onto iOS with *Furmins*, how do you see the company evolving?

We hope to move more and more

towards publishing, and also have greater involvement in the promotion of our games just to get more visibility from the fans we have – to let them know that we are doing lots of things, not just *Dead Nation*, etc. We started slowly with *Furmins* on iOS last year, and we self-financed the DLC for *Dead Nation*, so in the future we hope to build on that and look into PC publishing with back-catalogue stuff.

Is your new iOS strategy going to change the types of games you make?

We're sticking to the core games we've done in the past that need a proper controller, and then we'll have a totally separate track to do iOS games that would be more suitable for that format, but still with an action focus. *Furmins* had realtime action in it, but we'll push more towards core gamer experiences. Can we combine new business models with downloadable console games? Can we make more service-type games like Valve? How can we combine premium games with this service model, and would people be willing to buy additional stuff? But we don't want to frustrate our players, 'Sorry, you can't progress. It's going to take you three days to upgrade this watch tower.' That's where I never spend a dime. I'm like, 'OK, I'll see you in three days!' [Laughs] ■



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EDITORS'
CHOICE
IGN

9.5

OUTLAND

GAMESPOT

9.0

Editor's Choice

DEAD NATION

joystiq

★★★★★

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EUROGAMER

9/10

DARE TO PLAY?

TALENT@HOUSEMARQUE.COM



HOUSEMARQUE

Nitro Games

A small studio that's bringing its PC strategy to tablets



Founded 2007

Location Kotka

Employees 20

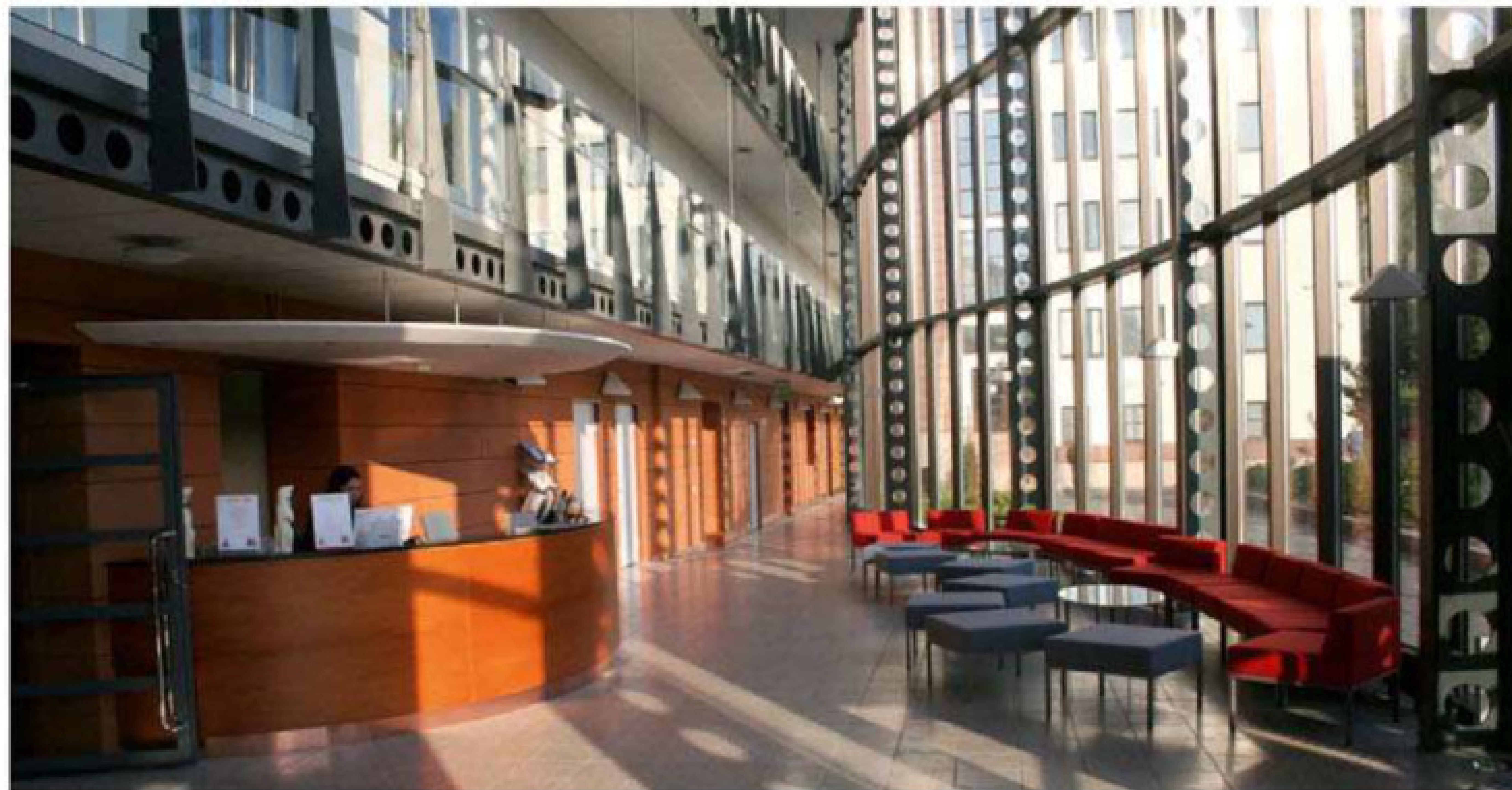
Key staff Jussi Tähtinen (CEO),
Brendon Neuwerth (business
development director)

URL www.nitrogames.com

Selected softography

East India Company,
*Commander: Conquest Of The
Americas*, *Sink 'Em All*

Current projects *Raven's Cry*



Nitro is split into two divisions: Nitro Games works on core digital and mobile games, while Octane Games is making console game *Raven's Cry*

STUDIO INSIGHT

Jussi Tähtinen
CEO



Nitro Games is located in the far east of Finland, near the Russian border. It has a history of creating deep strategy PC games, such as *East India Company* and *Commander: Conquest Of The Americas*, but it's now planning to use that expertise to bring console-quality games to tablets and smart devices. It also wants to introduce the social elements that it feels are missing from strategy games on other formats. CEO **Jussi Tähtinen** explains more about Nitro's plan for tablet dominance.

With your background in strategy games, how do you plan to bring this genre to tablets?

Designing a strategy game that spans hundreds of years is a very different challenge to, say, a level-based puzzle game where you don't need to worry about continuity. So our experience in the strategy genre, both good and bad,

really gives us an advantage when it comes to making this type of game work on tablets. And our experience with PC hardware will help us squeeze all we can out of them, too. And Microsoft's Surface tablets, for example, are much closer to a PC than they are an iPad. That will be more common in future, which should be an advantage.

Do you think that there's a large market for deep strategy games on smart devices?

The target group we're aiming to reach isn't the new consumers who have never played videogames. We believe there are a lot of people in their 30s or 40s that might have been players when they were teenagers – maybe PC, maybe the earlier consoles – but that nowadays don't have time to play any more, or don't want to go to the hassle of purchasing a PC that works for games. We want to bring those experiences to the tablet so that they can still play.

Has the appropriation of strategy genre tropes in more simple free-to-play games made it harder to sell genuinely deep experiences?

Yes and no. It's good that games have become [more] accessible, and that you only need to pay if you like what you're

playing – that's good for consumers. But because there are so many games, something has to give with price tags; it's one of the ways to separate future high-production-value games from the rest.

Do you benefit in any way from being so close to the Russian border? Have you had the chance to collaborate with any Russian developers?

I think being close to the Russian border is something that will have more and more value as time goes on. As of now, we've cooperated with some Russian companies, so we're in the early stages of getting into the Russian scene and getting to know the rules. Doing contracts with Russian companies is very different to doing something with, say, somebody from Europe or the USA. But when it comes to recruitment and resources, that's already an area where we benefit. There's a good train connection, and there are a lot of talented game developers in the Saint Petersburg area. Because we're so close to the border, all the regional companies that are to do with migration are used to working with Russians – visas are easy! But in terms of trade, so far at least, it seems to be that we buy stuff from them, whether it's employees or services, but getting it to work in the other direction is something we've still got to figure out. ■



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to both consoles and
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Nitro Games Ltd.

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info@nitrogames.com www.nitrogames.com

RedLynx

Despite being acquired by Ubisoft, the Trials creator still has an independent ethos

RedLynx
A UBISOFT STUDIO

Founded 2000

Location Helsinki

Employees 70

Key staff Tero Virtala (CEO),
Antti Ilvessuo (creative director)

URL www.redlynx.com

Selected softography

Trials HD, Trials Evolution,
Motoheroz, DrawRace 2

Current projects *Trials Evolution:*
Gold Edition, Nutty Fluffies



Trials Evolution: Gold Edition is the studio's focus, but it's working on a number of other projects, including support for *Nutty Fluffies* on iOS

**STUDIO
INSIGHT**
Tero Virtala
CEO


RedLynx's new office couldn't be a starker contrast with its previous premises. The 1970s hangover of wooden walls and floors that surrounded its developers have been replaced with the acres of glass and gallons of white paint that more commonly decorate game studios. But RedLynx has lost none of its cheeky playfulness after being acquired by Ubisoft in 2011. There are still remote-control toys tearing around the corridors here, and the well-worn wrestling mat has lost none of its menace (as we discover when it breaks our fall). But we're not here to spar. CEO **Tero Virtala** tells us what life is like with Ubisoft and how the paring has been essential in making *Trials Evolution: Gold Edition* – a PC release of *Evolution* with HD's tracks – a reality.

Tell us, how has the Ubisoft acquisition affected the studio?

In the early phases, we felt that a big

change like this was bound to have a number of effects on the company. We were expecting it to be mainly positive, but that we would have to work hard to make it go smoothly. But that didn't happen! It was a big surprise, but I think it's very much to do with the company culture of Ubisoft, how it fosters innovation and maintains studios' DNA.

So you gelled naturally? How do you fit in to the wider picture?

We seem to be a big part of Ubi's digital strategy. And I think we are in a very good position with that – Ubi appreciates us a lot. We have been able to fully focus on creating the games themselves. This wasn't the case when we were fully independent, and I don't think it ever can be. There are all those important support functions that the company needs to have, be they finance, legal, HR, etc.

How exactly have you benefited?

It's not discussed often, but when a small developer starts their creation, it's easy to say that the company can try to innovate and create any game that they like. But after that, you move to a point where you start needing project planning and implementation plans on how you do it. Not all small companies have access to the technology and resources needed. Of

course, every company has their special strengths, but being part of Ubi, we've already started cooperating with other studios, like Ubi Shanghai, on *Trials Evolution: Gold*. Staff have been really happy, and it means people can focus on how they want their careers to develop. If someone wants to have a mission somewhere else that helps our game, that's now possible.

What did Ubisoft Shanghai bring to the game?

They know the fragmented PC market, and what needs to be taken care of so that the game is as good as it needs to be. *Trials Evolution: Gold* is an online-based game, and developing those online elements, and the associated infrastructure, would have been a huge task [for us alone]. But Ubisoft, as a big company, has centralised services and infrastructure that means we don't need to focus on creating every single thing by ourselves. We can pick some technology that's ready and then focus on those *Trials*-specific things by ourselves. In the past, we had to create everything.

A couple of years ago, we were making excellent games and we were working hard to maintain that, and now I think we are in a better position to continue creating those. ■

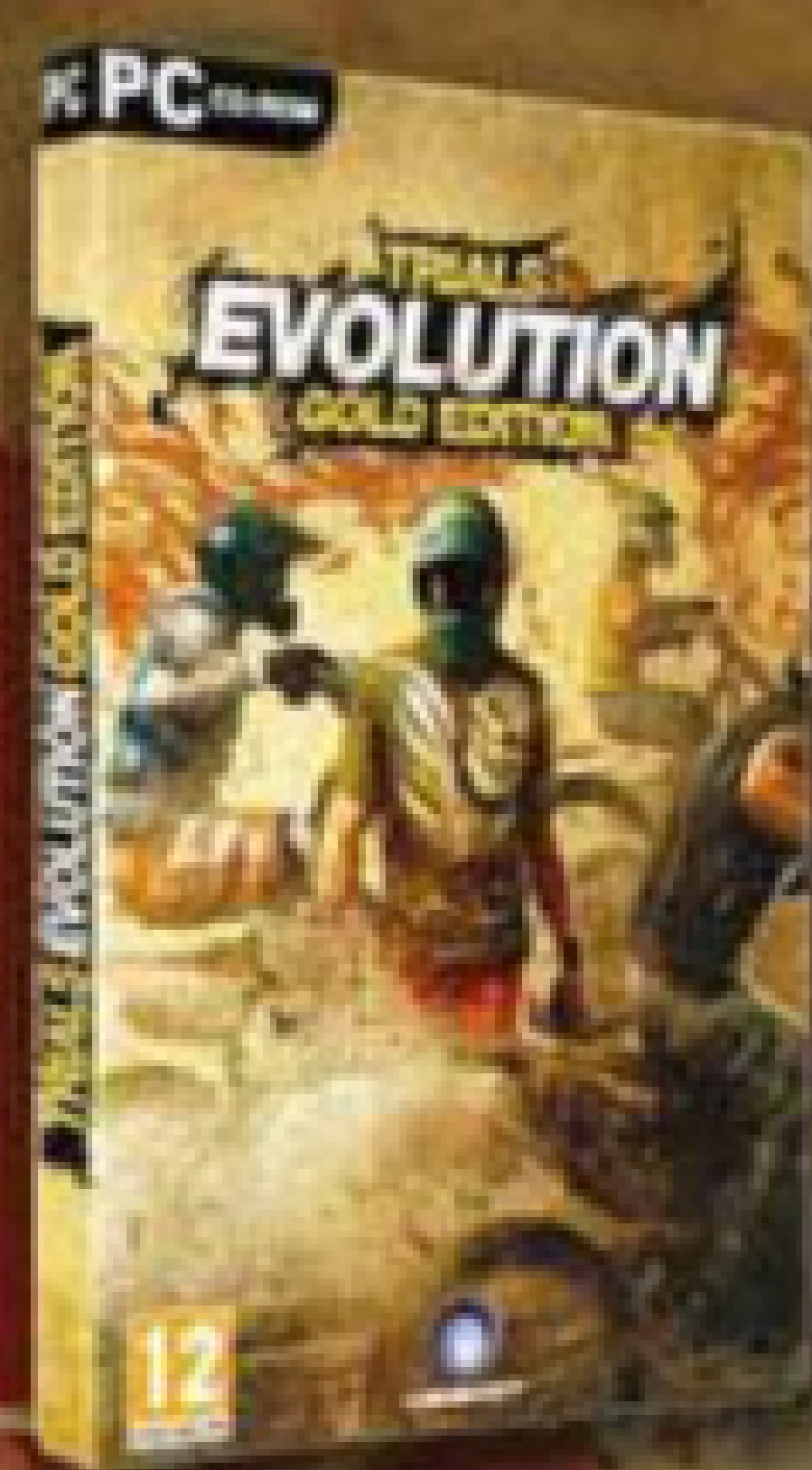
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RedLynx

A UBISOFT STUDIO



UBISOFT

Remedy Entertainment

Remedy's branching out onto new platforms, but retaining its principles

REMEDY

Founded 1995

Location Espoo

Employees 93

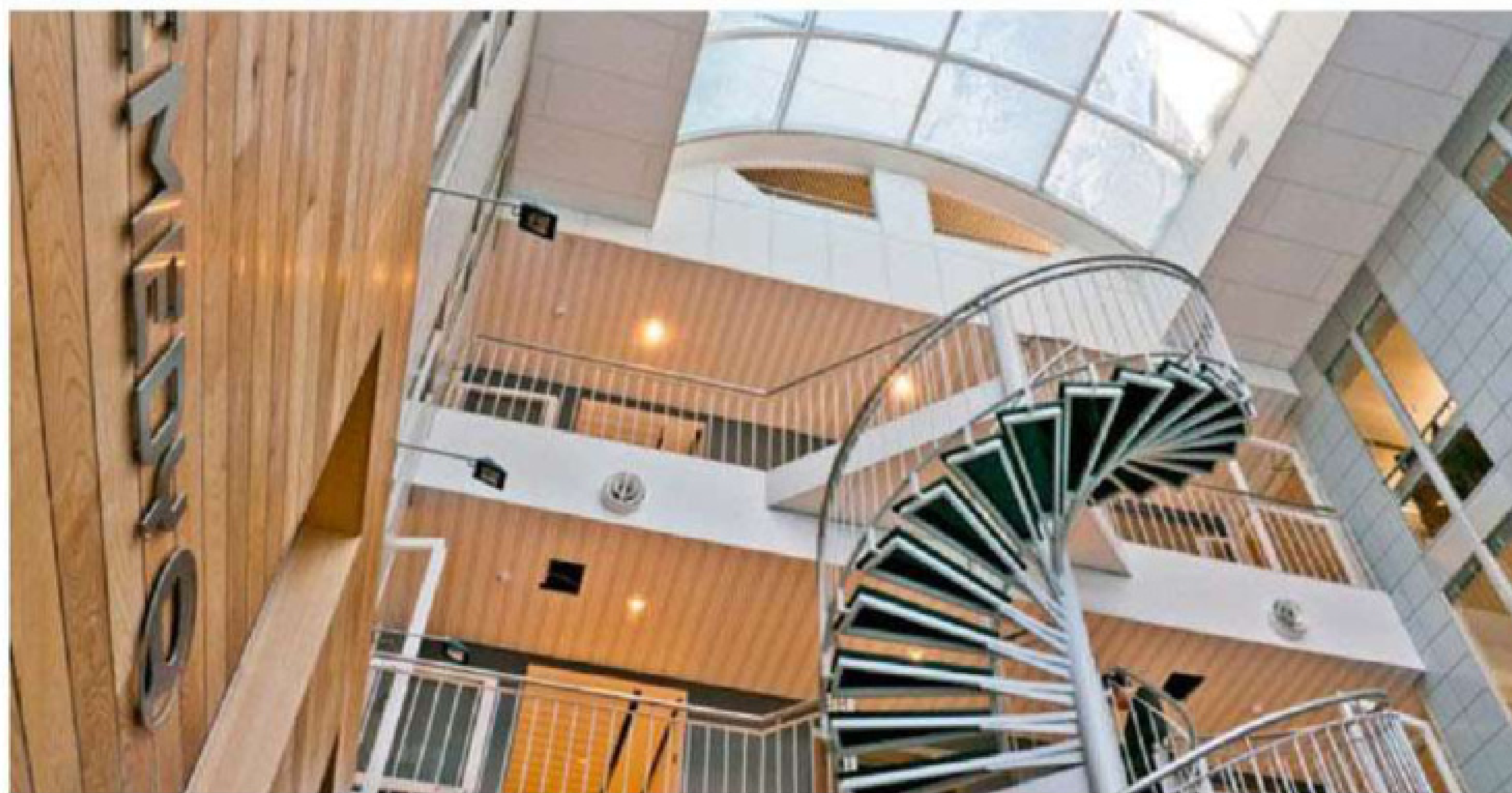
Key staff Matias Myllyrinne (CEO), Markus Mäki (CTO), Mika Reini (CFO), Sam Lake (creative director), Aki Järvillehto (executive VP)

URL www.remedygames.com

Selected softography

Death Rally, *Max Payne*,
Max Payne 2: The Fall Of
Max Payne, *Alan Wake*

Current projects Unannounced
iOS project, unannounced
next-gen consoles project



Remedy Entertainment's light and airy new offices are designed to provide a more flexible working space for its increasingly fluid teams

STUDIO
INSIGHT
Aki Järvillehto
Executive VP



Remedy has fostered a reputation for taking its time. Over the course of its 18 years, only six games have left its doors, and those across just three series: *Death Rally*, *Max Payne* and *Alan Wake*. But now the trickle is becoming more of a flow, with the studio releasing the downloadable *Alan Wake's American Nightmare* last year and dedicating a team to in-house mobile projects. It's certainly not about to rush anything, though – the same philosophy it applies to its internal microbrewery, which produces Asgard's Best beer. Here, executive VP Aki Järvillehto talks up the more lithe Remedy.

How is Remedy approaching mobile?

Over the last couple of years, as we've gone into digital distribution and mobile, it's been really important for us to nail down what a Remedy game stands for in this context – it's got to be different. It would be wrong to take something like

Alan Wake and just port it over to tablets, add in a horrible control scheme and say, 'There you go!' But we're using the same principles [as ever] – a very strong focus on a single USP, and very focused execution around the same kind of elements that we used before.

Have the lessons you've learned working with mobile fed back into your console development?

It's changed a lot of things in a very positive way. There's almost an equal amount of learning from both sides. We bring our console experience to the table, but we're also seeing a lot of mobile experience feedback. What can we do to make the core game more exciting? How do we want to market and promote our games? We've always been very involved in that.

So we can expect to see more smaller projects, such as *American Nightmare*?

Right now, we're focused on creating a brand new franchise on iOS. But I think the last two years of being able to ship on so many platforms has given us a lot of perspective. It makes us more whole.

Is there a sense within Remedy that the company is being reinvented?

It feels more like a natural evolution.

Perhaps it's because one of our founders and CTOs was the guy who started up the company with *Death Rally* and had the crazy idea of making it happen on iOS. So it's the old-timers that got the ball rolling! At the same time, as I've said, we've had to learn a lot and we're growing fast too. It's really stressed the fact that everything we do has a huge dose of Remedy in it. We're not going to start chasing *Angry Birds*!

Given Remedy's storytelling pedigree, and your move to iOS, you must be keeping a close eye on Telltale after *The Walking Dead*.

That game's absolutely brilliant. Telltale is a studio that we're watching closely, because they've done a lot of work in the same kind of field that we have, and we have a lot of respect for them. I wish there were more studios like that. There's room for more storytellers out there.

Do you think we're currently enjoying a storytelling renaissance?

We certainly hope so, especially given that there are so many platforms and so many alternatives to choose from. Stories are powerful, they are important, and it's such a primal need that we have to tell and hear them. They're way underused in games. ■



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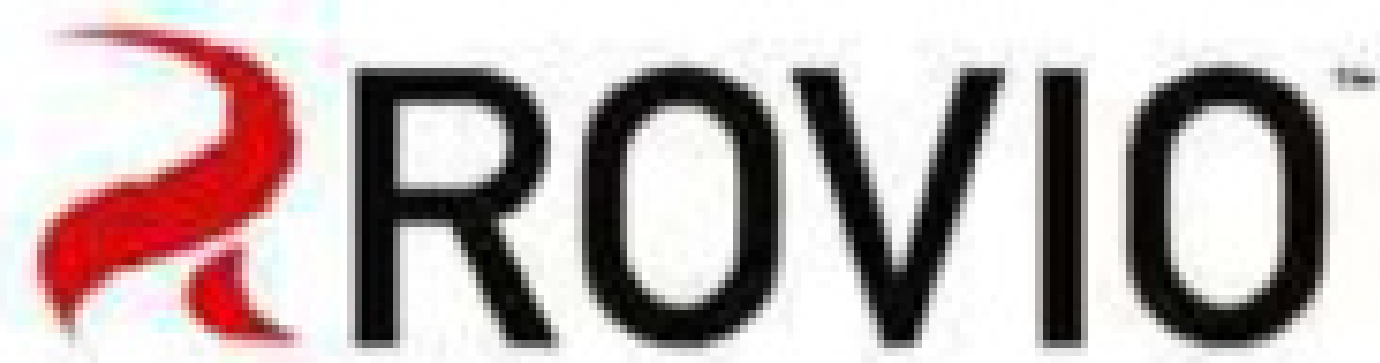
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REMEDY 

Rovio

What's next for the creator of a cultural phenomenon?



Founded 2003

Location Espoo

Employees 550

Key staff Mikael Hed (CEO, co-founder), Niklas Hed (co-founder), Peter Vesterbacka (CMO), Harri Koponen (COO)

URL www.rovio.com

Selected softography

Angry Birds, Angry Birds Seasons, Angry Birds Space, Amazing Alex, Bad Piggies, Angry Birds Star Wars

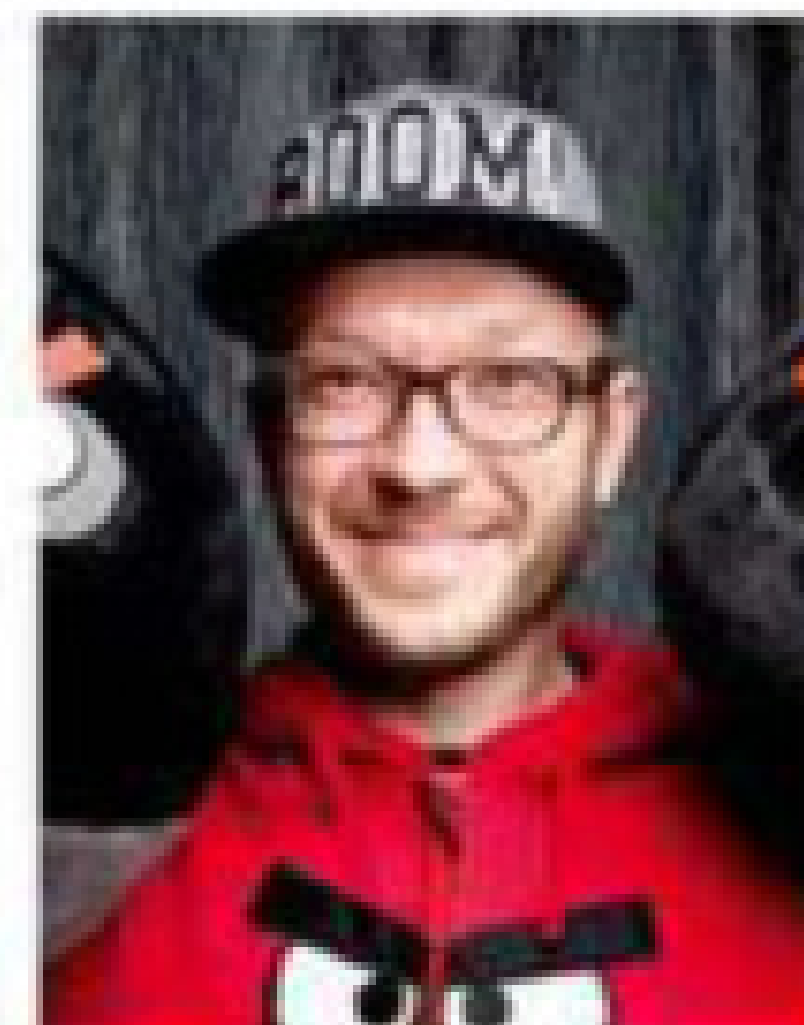
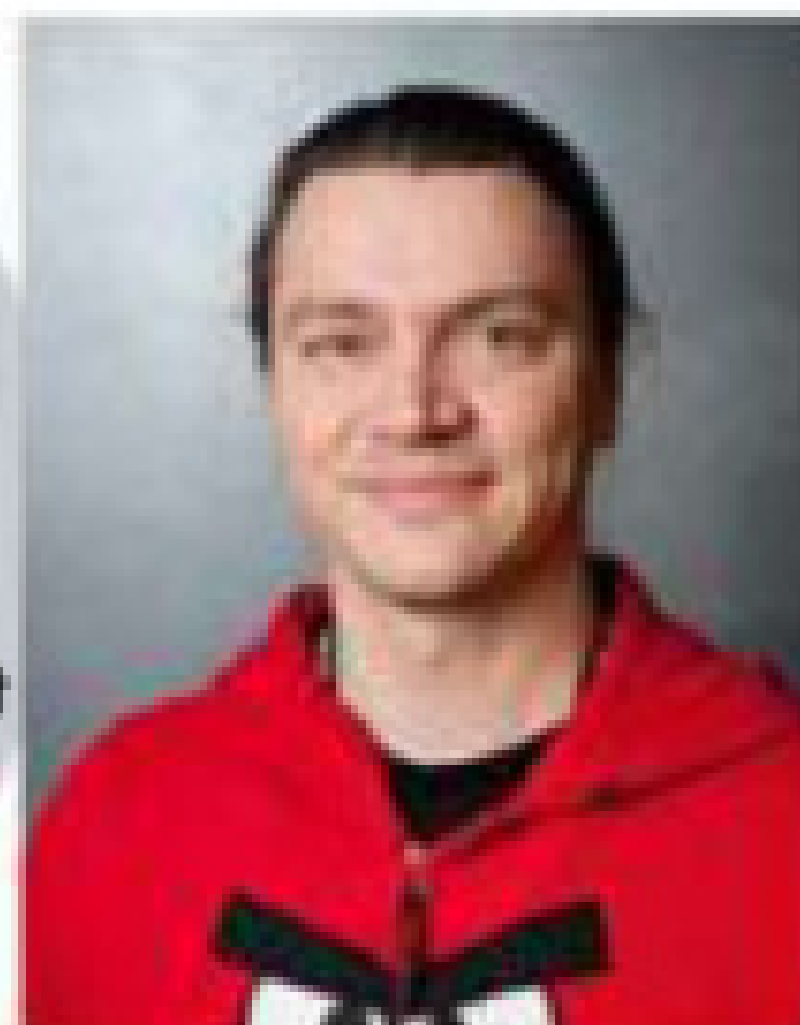
Current projects Unrevealed *Angry Birds* titles, prototyping multiple projects



Rovio's offices in Espoo are bright and colourful. As you'd expect, almost every surface is occupied by an Angry Birds toy, lunch box or book

STUDIO INSIGHT

Sami Lahtinen
SVP of game development
Ville Heijari
SVP of brand marketing



Thanks to *Angry Birds*' popularity and a keen eye for brand placement, Rovio has grown to a dizzying 550 employees. By the time you read this, the chances are that figure will have grown again. With its recent *Star Wars* tie-in, the company has cemented its cultural relevance, while the recently released million-selling *Angry Birds Trilogy* on PS3, 360 and 3DS has proven that the avian videogame phenomenon has appeal beyond mobile devices. Surrounded by plush *Angry Birds* toys, we spoke to SVP of game development **Sami Lahtinen** and SVP of brand marketing **Ville Heijari** about where Rovio goes next.

You've grown at a rapid pace over the past couple of years. How has Rovio changed as a result?

Ville Heijari We've definitely gone from being a game developer to being a media and entertainment company.

property and different retail operations, and so on.

Sami Lahtinen From a games development point of view, we have ramped up our operations quite significantly. We are now about 220 employees in the game business unit, and we have four different studio entities: two here in Espoo, one in Tampere, and at the end of 2012, we opened up our Stockholm office. So ramping up our capacity to build more, and better, games is of course something that has been ongoing during the past couple of years.

Was it a challenge to manage such an extravagant expansion?

VH No, it has been a walk in the park... [Laughs] We gained 300 employees during the past year. The first challenge was finding the right talent, of course, as many companies are doing very well in Finland, so there is competition over talent,

especially in Helsinki. Which is why we opened a studio in Tampere.

What's the next step for the company?

VH We have different *Angry Birds* games, and that's all building the brand. And then something like *Bad Piggies* is definitely in the same domain, but it's a spin-off and we can see it becoming its own thing. We have a lot of other in-house properties cooking, too – there's a lot of prototyping going on. In December, we had 263 million [monthly active users], which is more than Twitter has! So we have a massive audience who we can also publish games for, so we're in discussions with many developers about publishing different properties.

Angry Birds casts a big shadow – how will you approach the challenge of releasing new IP?

VH *Angry Birds* definitely has a life of its own, so 2013 is going to be about building up Rovio as a brand. The publishing effort is part of that, making Rovio the stamp of quality. We have a big task ahead of us, but we want to educate people that, 'Hey, we're the developer of *Angry Birds*; we're bigger than Twitter.' [Laughs] We know what we're doing, we have the development power, and we're actually a really cool place to work. ■

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Sulake

Why the Habbo creator is welcoming developers into its world



Founded 2000
Location Helsinki, London, Madrid
Employees 60
Key staff Antti Viitanen (SVP, product)
URL www.sulake.com
Selected softography Habbo
Current projects Pocket Habbo



The Habbo game portal saw over 1,000 registrations early on, but many were users posing as devs to learn what was happening to the network

STUDIO INSIGHT

Antti Viitanen
SVP, product



Sulake, the creator of hugely popular teen social network Habbo, suffered through a rough 12 months last year. It's regrouping now, and has the lucrative game market in its sights. Its proposition is simple: avoid the challenges of overcrowded networks by selling your game on its uncluttered marketplace.

Antti Viitanen – SVP, product – explains why the time is right to get involved.

Why did you decide to bring games to the Habbo network?

[iOS games] *Niko* and *The Lost Monkey* were tests of how it would work if we were moving into mobile games. We got quite nice download figures, but not as much as we wanted, so we parked that last spring and started to build an API. It's really a developer site very similar to Facebook's. We launched it in September 2012 in Finland, and in essence what we're doing is opening our doors for any

game developer who's producing web-based games for the teenage audience to bring them into our Game Center. So we have become a publishing platform for game developers globally.

How does it work?

We work the same way Facebook does. You register at dev.habbo.com and you get access to our three million-plus game client users (there are eight million website visitors a month), our social graph and our monetisation system. So if you've already developed products for Facebook, porting the same game over should take two or three days.

Do you host the games?

The developer runs the game on their servers just as they would on Facebook. And it's worth noting that Facebook revenues are 70/30, but on Facebook the competition is fierce. Typically devs have to pay about 20 per cent of the revenue back into advertising to be bubbled up. Whereas with us, because we're a fledgling platform, we can also guarantee you marketing visibility and offer a revenue split of 80/20.

As an example, we created a very simple game called *Habbo Fast Food* to test the client. In the first six weeks, it had 3.6 million unique players and made

about 100,000 euros from in-game power-ups. So that's our case study!

Surely Habbo could become just as cluttered? Will you set any limitations on the number of games published?

Yes. We've decided that we want to publish about one to two per month, and we're going to promote these about a month in advance. There are limited promotion slots, so we have to keep that in mind, too. If you have a game there, pretty much everybody will try it.

So are you planning to take these games to mobile, too?

As it happens, from 2006 we've had projects that are geared towards bringing Habbo to mobile. But the client is big and, you might say, cumbersome. Those attempts were geared towards bringing the whole of Habbo into mobile, but that's impossible. But this Christmas we brought out Pocket Habbo for iOS. In March comes the Android version. This spring we'll bring it to tablets, but it will still be messenger- and friending-based, because that's the core of Habbo. You can see various types of futures unfolding here. One of those is once HTML5 breaks through in the next few years, we can do games.habbo.com, which will work universally with every device. ■

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HABBO

Supercell

Finland's new mobile giant aims to stay small and lean

SUP ERC ELL

Founded 2010
Location Helsinki
Employees 85
URL www.supercell.net
Current projects *Hay Day*,
Clash Of Clans



The teams handling *Hay Day* and *Clash Of Clans* are small but have a great deal of creative control. They're also extremely proud of their charges

STUDIO INSIGHT

Ilkka Paananen
CEO



Fittingly, Supercell occupies an old Nokia building. A vast glass atrium is surrounded by walls of more glass on every side, fronting floor after floor of empty office space. At the very top of this structure, a modest segment is occupied by Finland's latest mobile heroes. Its two current apps, *Hay Day* and *Clash Of Clans*, have been hugely successful, the former hitting the top 10 grossing apps in 79 countries and the latter having made number one in 121 countries. Not bad for a team of fewer than 90 people that's just two years old. We sat down and ate breakfast with its infectiously enthusiastic CEO, **Ilkka Paananen**, to chat about Supercell's rapid rise to fame.

You've achieved considerable success on iOS. What's the studio's secret?

We call our strategy 'small'; for us, we really want to build a different kind of game company. What traditionally

happens to many games companies is a small group of individuals put together something great, they ship a hit product and money starts to come in. And they get the idea that the next product is going to be so much bigger. So now instead of five people, it's going to be 25 people or 100 people, and instead of spending six or nine months to develop it, it's going to take three years. But usually that results in dinosaurs and giants that move slowly, and bureaucracy takes over. For us, it's all about sticking to small teams where everybody can contribute to the game.

So the company could theoretically continue to expand, but the number of teams, not their size, would go up?

Yeah, that's the ethos. We hope that the passion and personality of the teams shows in the games. In triple-A console games, that type of model hires specialists where people are only doing a certain part of the game, and it's so much harder to feel like you have any influence over it. Maybe this model wouldn't work in the traditional space, but we believe it's by far the best model for this new platform.

Teams have a lot of freedom, then?

Yes, and we actually try to encourage failure! We try to get prototypes to a milestone that we call 'company playable'

as fast as possible. It's a really rough version that we've perhaps invested two months in, then we release it to the whole company. So we have 85 people playing the game, and they give feedback and rate it from one to five stars. Many of those projects end at that point, but then we organise a company-wide postmortem of what went right and what went wrong. At the end of those meetings, we hand out a bottle of champagne to every member of the team that has 'failed'. We really try to celebrate it! If you want to have innovation, you really need to be OK with failing more often than you succeed.

Free-to-play is based on failure, too, since you monetise only a small percentage of players. Do you think your culture could exist without it?

I think that really is the beauty of not only the free-to-play model but also this platform, because it enables a lot more focus on gameplay. I actually think the golden age of PC gaming is coming back, because you can create these smaller products that are all about gameplay and not about cinematics. The assets you need to create for a triple-A console title these days get so much attention and money that quite often the gameplay is a secondary priority. On tablets, it's the other way around. ■



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Umbra Software

A tech company that focuses on the hidden to make games better



Founded 2007

Location Helsinki

Employees 11

Key staff Otso Mäkinen (founder, CTO), Thomas Puha (director of developer relations), Teppo Soininen (COO), Antti Hätälä (lead engineer)

URL www.umbra3.com

Selected softography

Guild Wars 2 (with ArenaNet)

Current projects *Destiny*

(Bungie), *Witcher 3* (CD Projekt),

Dirty Bomb (Splash Damage)



Umbra's offices are small but distinctive. They're full of colour and dominated by this large stencil piece of the company's name on the wall

STUDIO INSIGHT

Thomas Puha
Director of developer
relations
Teppo Soininen
COO



wouldn't be able to afford similar solutions. Even though our technology is more narrow in scope and very high-end, through Unity it's available to more developers with a smaller budget.

Umbra Software specialises in occlusion-culling middleware, which might sound dry. But like Havok, this is a tech company with a playful streak and a passion for games, having helped power *PlanetSide 2*, *Mass Effect 3* and more. Talk of polygon counts may have died out now, but developers still need to worry about memory limitations and Umbra has made it its business to help them squeeze every drop of power from hardware. We spoke with director of developer relations **Thomas Puha** and COO **Teppo Soininen** to learn more.

Umbra's now in Unity – is your tech a good fit with that tool?

Teppo Soininen Yeah, we're an integral part of Unity's rendering engine, so we're really closely tied together. And our philosophy is pretty similar to Unity: they have the 'democratise development' thing and deliver tools to developers who

Is the increasing power of tablets making Umbra more widely relevant?

Thomas Puha Mobile tablets are getting much more powerful every six months, so you get a lot of benefit from Umbra there as 3D gets more complicated and so on. But that's the interesting challenge, because obviously there's a certain price to our software, so if you are a three-person team with a small budget, it's probably not realistic to buy us separately. But we've spent a lot of time thinking about where 3D will go. There's really high-end 3D already: look at *Infinity Blade*. 3D will get more complicated, so there's going to be more need for us, which is great.

TS But that's one of the strategies that we have at the moment. Through Unity we are able to reach smaller developers and give them access to exactly the same technology that bigger devs are getting.

Umbra must also be useful outside of game development?

TP We deal with some architecture and industrial companies [and] their models are infinitely more complicated and high-poly than anything games do.

TS You can't really cheat your way out of polygons in those sectors; you can't not model every screw individually! It's highly likely that in the future we'll have fully 3D models of cities that you can navigate through with your phone, or CAD models – go into a factory and do electrical repairs with a model of the building, etc.

TP If you model an oil rig, it has to have everything, an insane amount of data, which we can help with.

But is Umbra, in your minds at least, first and foremost a gaming technology?

TP Personally, I care about games. But obviously, if we think about the company, there's a huge untapped market for us.

TS At the moment, we're focusing on games and the other stuff is just a product of us doing a really good job with games. A lot of visualisation companies, like Boeing and whatever, are looking into gaming to get the latest technology to apply to their fields. Architecture and CAD modelling has always dragged behind gaming – gaming is the tip of the iceberg. ■

THE WITCHER 3 WILD HUNT

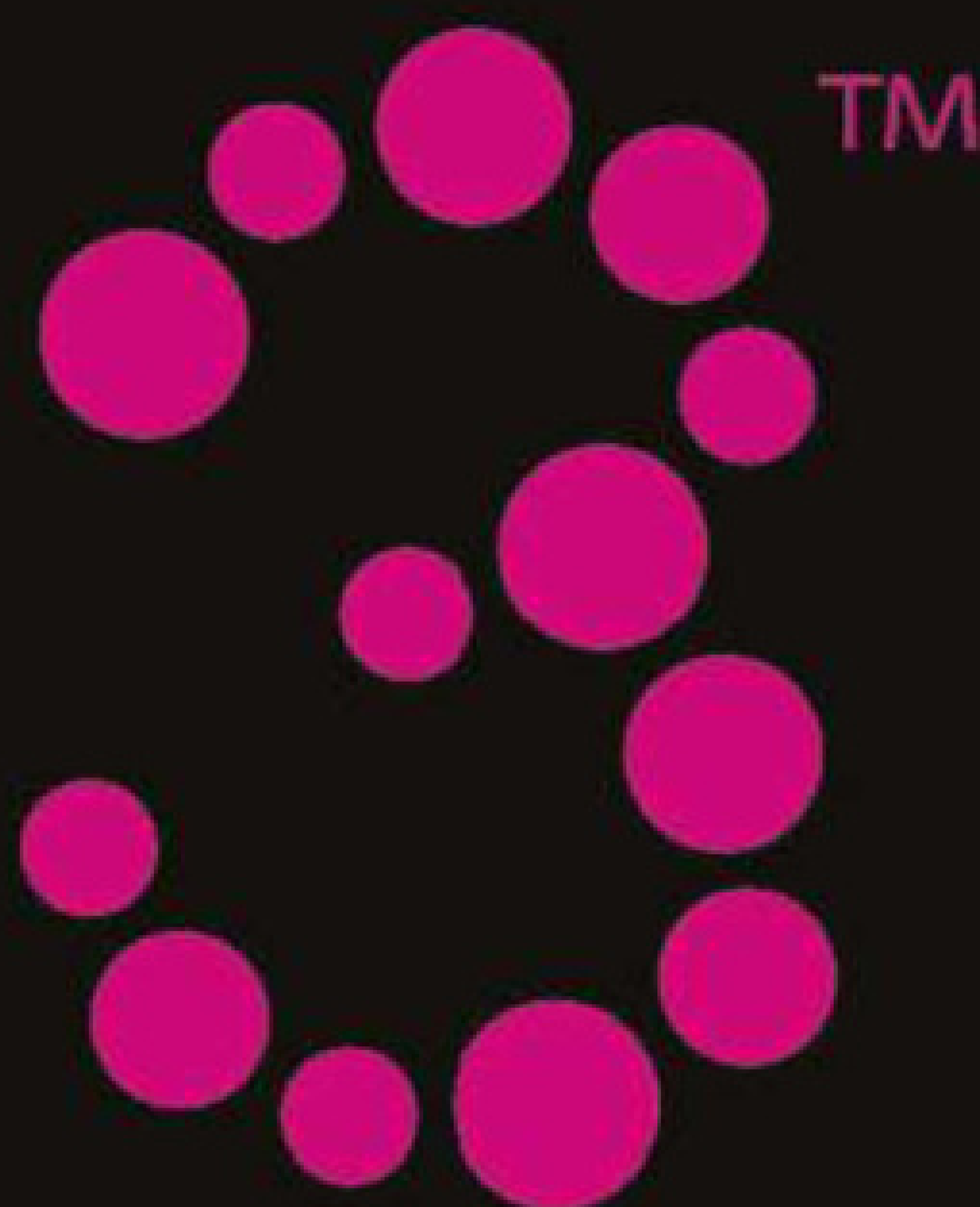
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JOENSUUN TIEDEPUISTO

**Founded** 1990**Location** Joensuu**Employees** 21**Key staff** Veikko Miettinen (development manager), Timo Ruohio (development manager)**URL** www.carelian.fi**Current companies** Tripworks (www.tripworks.fi), Mental Moustache (www.mental-moustache.com)

Among the startups Joensuu has helped is Tripworks, which makes educational games and has already struck a deal with China's schools

BACKER
INSIGHT**Veikko Miettinen**
Development manager
Timo Ruohio
Development manager

Veikko Miettinen is a development manager for Joensuu Science Park's game incubator, and his daughter is mad at him. We discover this when a *Hay Day* alert flashes up on his phone and we pass comment. We learn that as punishment for a misdemeanour, she's not allowed to cultivate the land on the farm they share for a week. Miettinen, however, can't stay away – he tells us so, his face painted with a wicked grin. Now he, **Timo Ruohio** and the other development managers involved in the Joensuu incubation initiative are hoping to create more companies like *Hay Day* maker Supercell – and presumably more family disputes along with them.

What does your incubation programme offer to startups?

Veikko Miettinen We have the resources and money to get these companies out from Joensuu to the world. For example,

Tripworks and Mental Moustache have been to Malmö, Paris and San Francisco already – they have to pay a little for the flights, but everything else comes from us. And we can teach these

people about the business of games.

Why are you based so far from the capital area?

Timo Ruohio Why are we doing this 400km from Helsinki? Everybody can't fit in Helsinki; there is a lack of housing. And our support is regional. Sometimes it's a little bit problematic, because we are working with the educational institutes of North Karelia and we have university, polytechnic and vocational-level facilities here, which generate around 150-200 students. We want to help the Finnish game industry to grow, but by incubating in North Karelia, we're kind of taking employees away, because they're starting their own companies and not going to the big companies in Helsinki.

Ultimately, though, surely the whole industry benefits.

TR Exactly. Making games is a difficult

task, and if school is three years, that's not even half of the experience you should have. You probably need somewhere close to 10,000 hours to be good in any given field or discipline; you can learn to play the piano in 10,000 hours. That means seven years of working full time. So if we're taking guys studying in North Karelia and then giving them a chance to try to be an entrepreneurship by themselves, they'll better understand their position if they later choose to work for a bigger company. And more and more, those big companies, like Remedy and Supercell, they're looking for seniors – so how the fuck can we provide seniors [and] send them straight from school? We can't. To make the ecosystem work, we're trying to make startups that can survive.

What other benefits does being at Joensuu offer?

VM We have a good team of people that we can use, but one other small detail is that there is this rock festival called Ilosaarirock, and at the same time we stage an event called Illusion that concentrates on sound and music in games.

TR It's a two-day seminar event about games, and yet we have Motörhead, The XX and Sigur Rós playing! How could you not want to come to that? [Laughter] ■

JOENSUU SCIENCE PARK



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